

Amorous **CONFESSIONS**

9^D



Nat. Long

Amorous

CONFESSIONS

NUMBER

1

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A RAYBURN PRODUCTION



THERE I was, sitting on the platform of the Piccadilly Underground Station, my handbag and its contents scattered all about me, and my clothes dusty and dirty.

That sounds a funny way to begin a story, doesn't it? But that was just how this story started with me.

It's quite true. For me, then, that was the start. It might even have been the start of my life for all I knew. Because I didn't remember a solitary little thing about my past life. I didn't remember anything. I was a victim of the most violent form of amnesia.

You read these "ads" and "persons missing" columns in the Sunday papers: description of missing persons, perhaps a bad likeness in a small photograph, and details of when last seen. It finishes as a rule with the words: "believed to be suffering from loss of memory."

You read those and forget about them, doubtless not even wondering where the persons can be, or what is happening to them, or if they ever got safely home again.

Well, here's the true story of such a case. No one can be better qualified to tell it than I, because I was the one to whom it happened.

I knew nothing when the young man came up to me. He gave me his hand and helped me to clamber to my feet from the hard platform, then he said:

"That was nasty."

I passed a hand across my brow dazedly.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"You made a rush for the Uxbridge train, and had to jump back when the doors closed. You tripped, fell, and apparently banged your head on the platform."

"Did I—did I lose my senses?"

"For a moment. At least, I think so. But only for a moment. I rushed along as fast as I could."

As it chanced we were alone on the platform, but now two more travellers came down, and the young man began to gather up my things and stow them in my bag.

He said, then: "You really look very white. Look, perhaps you ought to come up and have a drink——?"

I agreed instantly, because I felt queer. Awfully queer. I knew I was on a subway platform, and had been waiting for the Uxbridge train, because he'd told me that. But aside from that my entire mind was a hazy brown blank. Just a void, without any recollection of anything that had ever happened to me before a couple of minutes ago.

We went up the escalators, and he held my arm to steady me. When we came out in Piccadilly he took me to a neat little pub in a side-street near the Windmill, and said:

"Brandy, yours had better be."

I took the brandy and spluttered and coughed over it. He smiled.

"You're not used to drinking?"

I said: "I—I'm afraid I don't know."

"Well, if you—*what*?" he said, sharply. "Did you say you didn't know?"

"No. I don't know if I drink or not."

"Are you pulling my leg?" he said, regarding me curiously. "Because if you are I should warn you that there are no bells on it."

"I'd better tell you, I think," I said, slowly. "I—I've lost my memory."

He looked at me sceptically.

"Now you *are* pulling my leg."

"I swear I'm not. Before you helped me up I can't recall a thing. I don't know who I am—or where I live. Or—or anything." He whistled. "Do you mean that that's what happened when you banged your head? Is that what you're trying to say?"

I nodded, and winced as my head gave me a twinge.

He said: "Amnesia—yes, it could happen like that. But don't worry. It's probably only temporary—it'll pass. And we can soon find out who you are, and where from. Then I think a taxi is indicated and I'll take you along home."

He produced my handbag. "Suppose you look through this and find your ration books and identity card."

I nodded. "There should be something, shouldn't there?"

I opened the bag and funnily enough I didn't even recognise the articles that were in it. There was a gold cigarette case, lady's size, initialled "G. M." There was a crumpled handkerchief; a small snapshot of a little girl of about two, which said on the back: "Baby Anne, aged two." There was a powder compact and a soiled powder puff, plus ten Capstan and some loose change.

Nothing more.

"Well, this is a fine mess," said the young man, scratching his head. "Don't you recognise the snap of the baby?"

I shook my head.

"Do you think she's yours?" he asked.

"I can't even be sure if I'm married or not," I said.

"You are married," he told me. "You're wearing your wedding ring."

I looked down, and so I was. I took it off and peered inside. It said: "1941—G. M."

"G. M." again," said the young man. "The same initials as the cigarette case. So we've got so much—you're married and your initials are G. M. What could that stand for—Grace? Gertrude? Greta?"

He reeled off a long list of Christian names, to all of which I shook my head. In the end I said:

"It really isn't any use. I just couldn't remember even if you mentioned the right name My mind is a complete blank."

He looked serious. "Then what are we going to do?"

I studied him. He was clean-cut and handsome, and very fit-looking. I liked the way he had elected to share my burden so speedily, the way he had said, "What are we going to do."

I said: "I suppose the correct thing is to report to the police, isn't it?"

"That would be the best way."

I bit my lip. "What will they do?"

"Try to trace your family. Circulate your photograph."

"But—suppose they don't find them right away? What will happen to me then? Will they quarter me in some hospital?"

He frowned. "I suppose they will. They'll think you're in need of medical care."

I shuddered. "I couldn't stand that. I hate being messed about like that. I—I think I'll just stay at some hotel for tonight, and maybe I'll remember."

He shook his head. "You're not staying by yourself. Listen—and don't get me wrong—I have a comfortable flat in Earls Court. Suppose you come along with me and have the guest room? If you haven't remembered who you are by tomorrow, you can go to the police."

I didn't take long to thing it over and agree. He looked a really nice boy, and obviously he genuinely wished to help me. Added to which, with my splitting head, I couldn't have faced any long-drawn-out questioning from the police that day.

He bought me another stiff brandy, and studied the picture of the little girl.

"You can't say if she belongs to you?"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Hmm. She looks like you."

He sighed, and looked at me. He said: "You're very young to be married and have a baby. How old are you?"

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"That's something else I don't know," I told him.

"I would put your age at about nineteen or twenty," he said, after a grave scrutiny.

I smiled. "Lots of girls are married and have babies at that age."

He laughed. "Well, I can only say I'm sorry I didn't see you first. Shall we go?"

I blushed. Apparently I could still appreciate compliments, especially from my new-found friend, whose name, I had learned, was Raymond. He tucked my arm through his to help me, and we went to get a taxi. . .

That night, sleeping in his guest room, I had awful dreams.

* * * *

They didn't convey anything to me really; they were just weird nightmares in which I heard the whining, hissing shriek of subway trains in my ears, and saw one hurtling towards me, and pitched forward suddenly under the wheels with a frantic shriek.

I woke suddenly in perspiration, with his pyjamas, which he had lent me, sticking to my skin.

Then I realised he was by my side, cushioning my head on his shoulder, his arm about me, strong and protective.

I sobbed, and clung to him.

"What is it? I heard your screams."

"I—I had a nightmare . . . it was horrible!"

His hand soothed me, caressing my hair. "Take it easy. You're all right. Just your nerves that are badly jangled."

He sat beside me until I dozed off again. In the morning he was still seated there.

And now a new fear had come to me. Fear of the police. At his suggestion that we should go to them I was horrified. I felt a cold, gripping fear clutching at me. I imagined them pumping endless questions at me, giving me no peace, perhaps putting me in a mental home for attention. He tried to allay my fears.

"They'll help you——"

"No—no, I don't want to go to them, Raymond—please!"

He looked at me blankly. "But what can we do?"

I suddenly clung to his arm. "Raymond, don't make me go to the police. Please! I—I want to stay here—with you. I feel safe with you . . . I'd go mad if they tried to give me treatment."

He took me in his arms. "Listen! This is all repercussion from that crack on the head you took. You know that, don't you? It's a nervous condition . . ."

"I don't care what it is. I want to stay here with you."

Gradually he calmed me. And, after a while, he nodded.

"All right. Stay here for a couple more days—then you'll feel better."

Yes, in a couple more days I did feel better. But I didn't tell him so. For by that time I was madly in love with him, and I think he had come to love me deeply, too. But he often glanced at the wedding ring on my finger, and the picture of the baby.

Then one night the show-down came.

We were seated on his settee in front of the electric fire, and the lights were out. He was trying to bring some semblance of memory back to me. "Try hard," he said. "Try to remember just any tiny incident . . ."

I shook my head, conscious of his muscular body pressing close to me. "I can't."

He was very silent for a moment, as my head drooped on to his shoulder. Then he moved away, slowly. He said:

"You must go to the police tomorrow. This—this isn't right, you know. You have another life, another home, a family who'll grieve for you."

"What's the matter?" I said. "Don't you want me here?"

He laughed, strainedly. "If I hadn't wanted you here, I'd have turfed you out days ago. Only—well, if you're here much longer, I'll forget I'm a gentleman."

I breathed: "Why don't you, Raymond?"

He didn't answer.

I went on: "I don't want to find my other life—if any. I don't want to go back to it. I don't care about the past, it's behind me, and the future is all that counts now. Raymond—I might be cheapening myself, but I'm in love with you. It's silly, isn't it? But I'm madly, frantically, in love with you."

He replied, huskily: "It isn't so silly. I've been in love with you since just after I met you. I—that's what I'm so afraid of. You're married—have a baby. Think of her. You know there can't be anything between us."

I tilted my face close to him. I murmured: "Please, dear. Let's forget all of that. There's just you—and I. Only the two of us in the whole wide world, and no past, only a wonderful future—together. Why shouldn't I start a new life?"

And my lips brushed his chin. The next second he had taken me into his arms, holding me with breath-crushing force against him and covering my upturned face with passionate, demanding kisses . . . in that moment I knew a wonderful ecstasy I'm sure I'd never known before in all my life . . .

* * * *

Raymond was quiet the next morning, and a sense of strain existed between us. But, after a while, as I was ironing some of the undies I'd been wearing, he said:

(Continued on page 25)

NO TEARS at PARTING

by SYLVIA JEAN MORRIS



HOW can I describe my feelings when I first met Phillipe? How conjure up a picture of myself, nineteen years old, avid for life and romance, catapulted suddenly from the conventional shelter of a middle-class English home, into the gay, unknown adventure of Paris—and into the arms of the tall, sophisticated young Frenchman, the personification of my dreams?

Perhaps only by telling the whole story, leaving out nothing, excusing nothing.

I had won a scholarship to the Conservatoire of Music in Paris, and arrived, in a whirl of excitement, to be met by Nathalie, an old friend of my mother's. Nathalie was a smart, petite woman nearing fifty, with carefully-dyed red hair. By her side stood a dark, handsome man with mysterious depths in his brown eyes—depths which met my own, explored all the secret places of my heart.

"Why, Valerie—how you've grown!" Nathalie said.

I scarcely heard her, so conscious was I of those dark eyes scrutinising me. It was as if my heart were afire; a strange weakness possessed me; Nathalie, perhaps sensing it, recollected her manners.

"Oh, Valerie—this is my nephew, Phillipe—he's fond of music, too, so you should get on famously."

"How do you do?" I mumbled, suddenly inarticulate, though there was so much I wanted to say. Automatically, I held out my hand, felt his fingers over mine, their pressure warm and close.

"How do you do, mademoiselle?" He bowed slightly, and smiled. He had very white, even teeth; his lips were full, mobile.

I was glad, for the first time, that I was pretty; that my hair, smooth and golden, made a halo for my delicate features and large, grey eyes. I hadn't bothered much before. Music had been all-important. But now—. He let go my hand at last, and I heard the swift, sharp intake of his breath. With fierce happiness, I realised that he, too, had become victim to this strange magic which gripped me.

"Come, let us get into the car," Nathalie said. "Jacques will see to the luggage." She pivoted me towards the car purposefully. Was it my imagination, or did her dark eyes, so like Phillipe's, glitter strangely? I felt a stab of foreboding, of impending trouble. What? I entered the car. Phillipe sat close beside me. At the sweet proximity of him my heart pounded, drowning the warning of those glittering eyes.

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We sat in silence throughout the short journey across Paris. Through the window, I watched the city as it sped past me, vital and alive in the spring sunshine. I was so happy that it hurt. How beautiful life was—life which gave me my music, and Paris—and Phillipe.

I half-turned, and met his eyes. Desire lurked in their depths; passion, warmth, the romance I was newly awakened to. I trembled inwardly, all my youth responding.

"Here we are," Nathalie said, as the car drew up before a large, old-fashioned house just off the Madaleine. Any other time I would have been enchanted by the unexpectedly old-world charm of the house, shaded by two tall trees.

But I was barely conscious of anything except the man beside me, his vitality and magnetism.

As he helped me out of the car, I stumbled, falling against him. For a moment his hands held me, tight and close—so close that I could feel his heart hammering against his ribs. Then he released me, his eyes smiling. With what? Triumph, the knowledge that he had but to ask, and I was his? I did not know. I only knew that I loved him with a fierce, ardent passion of which I had not believed myself capable.

* * * *

We stood beside a table set upon the terrace of a little open-air café, set high up on Montmartre, Paris spread out below us, its lights twinkling magically in the night. We were close together, closer than we had ever been in the week which had passed—a week of stolen moments, of music, of dancing, our bodies linked. A week of hidden desire, held back by the ever-watchful eyes of Nathalie. A week in which this thing which gripped us both grew into flame, the fiercer for being undeclared, the more potent because of our restraints. Until tonight, when we had escaped to this hidden little café.

Phillipe's hand closed over my own. I closed my eyes, so exquisite was the delight which filled me. He leant forward suddenly, kissed me full on the lips—his first kiss. My lips trembled beneath his own; his kiss grew fiercer, his hands caressed me subtly.

"I love you, *ma chérie*," he whispered. His voice was thick with passion. "Say you love me, too—say you'll be mine."

For answer, I leant against him, my whole body trembling, afire with desire for his kisses, for his hands touching me. He held me away from him a little.

"Let's get away from here," he said, his voice low. "Somewhere where we can be alone."

He threw some money down on the table, and we went out, hand-in-hand, to where we had left the car. He started it up, and

headed for the countryside. The moonlight hovered mysterious and enchanting. The fresh, sweet scent of early spring was all about us.

Phillipe parked the car in a little lane, beneath the protective shadow of a tall tree, its arms outstretched. Somewhere near, a thrush sang, its music merging into the magic of the night. Phillipe's hands reached out towards me, drew me ever closer. For a moment I drew back, afraid of the unloosening of passion. My conventional upbringing, the memory of my parents, warned me, checked me. Until Phillipe's lips were upon mine again, his hands demanding, taking. Fire filled me, my heart raced, and I was conscious of nothing but the fact that we loved each other.

* * * *

I had been attending the Conservatoire for some weeks. Phillipe had gone to Marseilles on business. I missed him more and more, so that I could barely concentrate upon my studies. When he had been gone a week, and no letter came for me, unhappiness gnawed at me, doubts tormented me. Had he forgotten me—so soon?

Perhaps he did not really love me? Perhaps, as Nathalie had hinted, he was merely amusing himself? How much she guessed, I do not know. But I couldn't help recalling her words, the day after Phillipe had left for Marseilles.

"He is very attractive, is he not, my nephew? An incorrigible flirt. The girls, they love him—no wonder. But you, my dear little Valerie—you must be on your guard. I don't want you falling in love. Why, your mother would never forgive me." She patted my head lightly, and busied herself arranging some flowers in a vase.

Something in me rebelled. Why shouldn't I love him? He loved me—hadn't his lips and his arms told me so whenever we had been able to snatch a few moments away from Nathalie's too-watchful eyes? Soon we would tell Nathalie—when he landed that contract for his art posters which had been his reason for going to Marseilles. Then we would be able to marry. But not yet, while he still had to depend upon Nathalie for every penny. His parents were dead, and she had brought him up, helped him through art school. It was only natural he should want to stand on his own feet before asking me to marry him. And, in the meantime, how could we deny this love and desire for each other which possessed us?

I had said, as lightly as I could:

"Supposing Phillipe falls in love with me?"

I recalled Nathalie's eyes, the startled expression which had darted across them, the sudden, harsh glitter which reminded me of that first day in the car.

"What ideas you have in your young head," she laughed. Her laughter was forced, alien. For the first time, I disliked her, sensing something not quite genuine about her, something greedy.

"Phillipe, he will make a good marriage—someone with money. As for you, *ma chérie*—why, you will give a few concerts, then you will meet some nice Englishman, forget about music and marry him."

And with that she sailed from the room, leaving me with the birth-pangs of the doubts now consuming me.

* * * *

"Phillipe will be here any moment," Nathalie announced, later that evening.

My heart pounded unmercifully. Phillipe coming back? These two weeks of doubt and uncertainty, of his strange silence, were over. I would see him again, know the bliss of his lips on mine, the warmth of his hands. His love would chase away my fears . . .

The car grated on the road outside; I heard the door open, saw Phillipe stand framed in the doorway. Only the presence of Nathalie prevented me rushing to him and flinging my arms around him.

I looked into his eyes, expecting to see there the old warmth. But he barely looked at me. Instead, he turned, beckoned to someone behind him.

"Come, Yvonne," he said.

A girl emerged from the shadows of the doorway—a slim, dark, beautiful creature, expensively dressed. She was about twenty-two—six years younger than Phillipe. She smiled at him, patently in love with him.

"Yes, darling," she said. For a moment her eyes met mine. A little frown creased her smooth brow; then, with a barely perceptible lift of her eyebrows, she transferred her gaze to Nathalie.

"You're Nathalie," she said, sweetly. "Phillipe has told me about you. And perhaps he's written to you about me?" She held out her hands—towards Nathalie. On the third finger of her left hand there sparkled a large solitaire.

Dimly, I heard her say, lightly: "You know my father—he's the commercial art king." I was aware of a second's contempt—Phillipe was *selling* himself . . .

Then anger, humiliation, fought for mastery within me. I felt as if I could die, the pain in my heart stabbed so. Phillipe—Phillipe whom I had loved and trusted—Phillipe was doing this to me. *That* was why he had gone to Marseilles—to ask for Yvonne's hand in marriage, the story of the contracts a convenient excuse. And all the time he had known, had trifled with my love, accepted it as something cheaply given. He hadn't even had the decency to write and tell me he was becoming engaged.

My throat was parched, my knees weak.

I hated the house, hated Paris, hated Nathalie, who, I realised now, had been aware of everything. And, most of all, I hated Phillipe. Hated him, but loved him still. I rushed out of the room, up the stairs to my bedroom, and began to pack, wildly, feverishly, anxious only to get away, to return to decency and comfort of England, forgetful of my career, of everything save the ache in my heart, and the necessity to get away from Phillipe's presence.

* * * *

I returned to my parents' home in Surbiton to face the questions I knew must come. I had worked so hard to win that scholarship, left for Paris so eagerly, that I could scarcely blame them if they questioned my precipitate return. But, oddly enough, little was said. My father, engrossed in a secret job for the Air Ministry, full of forebodings of the war he sensed coming, was too glad to see me back in the safety of England to pass any comment. My mother, after a few careful probes, looked at me shrewdly, but remained silent. How much she guessed I dared not think.

I obtained a position as a pianist with a small but high-class orchestra which broadcast over the B.B.C., determined to make the best of the career I had all but wrecked.

It was during one of our broadcasts that I met John, who was in charge of some of the outside broadcasts. John, a lean, wiry man, with tired eyes and a kind face, inspired respect. I liked him at once. Though bitter against men because of my experience with Phillipe, I took to him because, beneath his rather taciturn manner lay a whimsical humour, a reliability of character, which gave me confidence in his integrity.

The first time he saw me, he gave me a brief smile and a casual "Hello, kid." I saw his eyes look at me for a long moment, then he became immersed in the work in hand. During the concert, I forgot him. But afterwards, just as I was due to leave, a little after the others, and alone, he said, a trifle hesitantly: "I don't like the idea of a kid like you seeing herself home—can I apply for the job this evening?" He grinned. It lit up his face, making him seem almost good-looking.

"Well—" I hesitated; I did not want to get too friendly with any man at present. "I don't live very far—Surbiton, to be exact. I guess I can see myself home, thanks." He looked down at me, quizzically. "What's the matter with you, kid? Scared of something—me, perhaps?"

"Don't be an idiot," I retorted, "and stop calling me kid. I'm twenty next birthday."

"That's mighty old," he agreed, solemnly. "Makes me feel like Noah—I'm thirty."

In spite of myself, I laughed. Perhaps I was being a bit ridiculous. Even if Phillipe

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had betrayed me, was that any reason to turn down a new, casual friendship? I wasn't likely to fall in love again—that way. That had been too close, bitten too deep. It was dead and buried, except in the secret recesses of my heart. A stab of pain pierced me. Yes, even now, Phillipe held my heart.

"Well?" John queried.

Well, why not? Perhaps he would help me forget? That he would prove an understanding friend, I knew instinctively.

"All right—if you wish," I agreed. "On one condition."

"And that is——?"

"That you stop calling me 'kid,'" I said.

"Okay, kid," he replied. At that we both laughed. We laughed all the way down in the lift. We were still laughing when John's car reached Surbiton and pulled up outside my house.

John parked the car, got up to help me out. As once before, on that never-to-be-forgotten spring day in Paris, I stumbled. His hands caught me, even as Phillipe's had done. His eyes, grey and steady, flickered ever so slightly, then he released me.

"Goodnight, kid," he said, abruptly, got back into the car, slammed the door, and drove off. I stared after him into the darkness, vaguely disturbed by what I had seen in those grey eyes. Then I brushed the thought aside impatiently. I was not going to ruin a grand friendship because of old memories. For though he had left me so abruptly, without a word regarding a future meeting, I knew I would hear from him again.

John 'phoned next morning. His voice came over the wire, light and eager.

"Hello, kid! I've a day off from the studio. Can you fit yourself into it?"

"Of course I can," I answered quickly. "I'd love to."

I was startled to realise it was true. I really wanted to see him again. There was something about him, his reticence, yet easiness of speech and manner, which intrigued me. I had no thought of romance, only the interest of a new, exhilarating friendship. And whatever the reason for his abrupt departure the night before, he made no reference to it. I became aware of his voice over the wire again.

"Say, kid—quit day-dreaming and take this in, will you? Can you meet me at 12.30—that's an hour from now? We can get some lunch, then see what we fancy doing. Think you can manage to powder your nose in that amount of time?"

"Yes, 'diot,'" I laughed. "It's powdered already."

"It is? Then I'll be at your door as soon as the old bus will get me there. Keep the powder on till then, will you?"

With that he rang off, leaving me with

the first sense of anticipated enjoyment since the affair with Phillipe.

* * * *

After that, all our spare moments were together.

Right from the start it was "kid" and "idiot"—bantering, friendly. Yet behind the banter I sensed his feeling towards me. He said nothing, however, and somehow I was glad. John had become dear to me. I did not love him—when his hand touched mine sometimes, or he held me in his arms while we danced—no response to his nearness quickened my blood. Yet we understood each other, our tastes and moods were akin. I did not want to lose him by a declaration of love. Perhaps I was selfish, but I so desperately wanted to keep this sweet friendship between us. It never occurred to me that John might want to marry me. He was thirty, a confirmed bachelor, his friends said. He'd worn himself to a frazzle getting to the top of his profession. He was satisfied with life as it stood. So I thought. Until one evening in July we were in the car, parked along the river, when he suddenly put his arm round me.

It was a warm, still night, clear and starlit. The silence floated around us, catching us up in its magic. Reminding me of another night, in spring this time—another car, other arms. . . .

I moved away from him slightly. His arm tightened. I closed my eyes, and for a moment it seemed as if Phillipe sat there so close beside me—as if all these months of heartache had never been. I heard his voice, low and husky.

"Say, kid—would you fancy—marrying me?"

I opened my eyes. Not Phillipe. John. John's face, John's crinkly brown hair, John's tired eyes. Dear John! He had asked me to marry him. After the first shock of surprise, I thought—I ought to have known. That's the kind of man John is.

But could I marry him, give myself to him, with the memory of Phillipe between us?

I looked deep into his eyes, saw the faith and worship mirrored there, and knew I could not pretend with him.

"John, dear," I said, gently. "I don't love you."

"I didn't expect you to," he answered, quietly. "But I want you to marry me—take care of you. Maybe, afterwards, you'll grow to care. There's nobody else, is there?"

I drew in my breath sharply, tempted. It would be so easy to say there was no one—to accept the security and peace of his love, that undemanding worship. But it would not have been fair. . . .



I looked deep into his eyes—saw the faith and worship mirrored there

"There—was," I said, briefly.

He looked at me for a moment.

"All over?" he queried. "Do I know the lucky guy?"

"You don't—you're not likely to. I shall never see him again. But he's—in my heart. You've a right to know that, at least, John. So I can't marry you, loving someone else. It's not fair to you."

His hand closed over mine.

"Supposing I'm willing to take the chance?" he whispered. "Supposing I promise to wait—until you feel you want me? Will you marry me then?"

Something in the way he spoke, the love in his eyes, touched me. Dear, dear John! Why shouldn't I marry him—make him as happy as I could? For him, I knew, there wouldn't be anyone else. He was a one-woman man. Perhaps, some day, when the memory of Phillippe had grown dim, I shall love John.

"Yes, John," I said, "if you *really* want me—like that."

"I do," he said, "so very much that I don't care about anything else."

He leant forward and kissed me full upon the lips, lightly and tenderly.

"Thanks, kid," he said, gruffly, "you won't be sorry."

Neither will you, John, neither will you, I vowed inwardly.

Two weeks later we were married.

* * * * *

Both of us were so absorbed in our work that there wasn't even time for a brief "honeymoon"—I put it like that because for neither of us was it a time of loving or of fulfilment. John more than kept his word. He was patient, undemanding, deriving his happiness from the knowledge that all our spare moments could be spent together.

Sometimes, when I caught a fugitive hunger in his eyes, I reproached myself. It was so cruel to John.

But I knew that unless I gave myself to him willingly, he preferred it the way it was. On the whole, it worked out well, chiefly because we were such good friends. Thus, a month sped by, until one fateful Sunday when we heard the news broadcast while waiting a call to go on the air. The date was Sunday, September 3rd, 1939. The news told us that Great Britain was once more at war with Germany. We looked at each other, John and I—each had become dearer to the other with the knowledge that life hitherto was to be uncertain, maybe dangerous. Maybe John would join up, go to France—maybe—. My heart lurched.

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France? What had happened to Phillipe? Would he survive the holocaust when it came? Where was he? I was surprised to find the very thought of him, even now, could stir me so.

Tears blinded me. Oh, Phillipe, Phillipe!

John saw the tears, and, mistaking their source, he put his arm round me comfortingly.

"It's all right, kid," he said, quietly. "Don't be scared." He smiled down at me, his eyes warm.

I was ashamed, hating myself. Dear John, whose every thought was for me—how little I deserved him. With a swift onrush of emotion, I bent forward and kissed him.

"I—I'm not scared," I choked, "and you—you shouldn't be such a dear. It makes the war seem worse."

The muscles of his jaw contracted. He stared at me for a long moment.

"That's the way *I* feel about it," he said, slowly. "I didn't think *you* felt that way, though."

Before I could answer, our cue came through for us to go on the air. I went into the studio, a strange, new feeling towards John stirring within me. I knew I would never love him as I'd loved Phillipe. But there were other kinds of love. The kind that is built on respect, on affection, things loved and shared. And now, the imminent prospect of separation made him doubly dear. I loved him. That night, for the first time, I gave myself to John.

* * * *

The months which followed were happy ones. John had been switched to propaganda at the B.B.C., so I saw more of him than I had hoped that first Sunday. Every moment we could, we snatched together, acutely aware that the period of the lull, of the "phoney" war, could not last. Nevertheless, despite my awareness, the fall of France, when it came, hit me hard, reviving the all-but-forgotten spectre of Phillipe. Again I wondered—what had become of him? Soon after the evacuation from Dunkirk, John had to go up North to make arrangements for transmitting from a new area. For the first time in months, I was alone. My father, more immersed than ever in research work for the Air Ministry, was in Scotland, my mother with him. All the people I knew were scattered all over England.

I missed John acutely—missed his love, his smile, his very presence—so much so that I became miserable, restless, a prey to ill-defined longings.

John had been away a week—a week of utter misery which even my work did not alleviate. My day's break fell on Tuesday, five days before John was due back. I could not go through those five days without some

distraction, some palliative for my overstrung nerves. In desperation, I decided upon a day around town.

I would do a round of the shops, lunch at a restaurant I'd never been to before maybe go to a show . . .

It was a fine, clear day, with just that hint of summer's magic which so often put an indefinable aura over a June day.

I left home early, determined to make the most of it, to do something to subdue my strange discontent.

I took the Tube from Knightsbridge, alighting a few minutes later at Piccadilly.

I walked rapidly in the direction of Regent Street—why, I do not know. Perhaps some strange fate impelled me—who can tell? I only know I *had* to walk that way, at that particular time; *had* to cross by Swan and Edgar's, *had* to turn that corner sharply, and collide with a tall, dark, oddly familiar figure in the uniform of the Free French. I found myself looking up into those dark eyes, which I realised now, I had never truly forgotten—the deep, dark eyes of Phillipe.

As I looked into that handsome face I had never expected to see again, a multitude of emotions strove for mastery within me. Old memories, bitter-sweet, clashed with my last memory of him, cynically bringing Yvonne back to the house in Paris . . .

"Ma chérie," he smiled, "you haven't changed—not one little bit." He put his arms round me and hugged me, not amorously, but the way one greets an old friend. Despite all that had happened, the old fire filled me at his touch. Only now, when we stood face to face again, did I realise his hold upon my emotions. I drew back from his embrace, trying to get a grip upon myself. I remembered I was married, that John loved me. It was no use. I had to betray myself, even by so little, to the compulsion of those brown eyes, and I knew I was lost.

"But I *have* changed." I tried to banter. "I'm a year and a half older. I'm not young and—and silly any more. I—I'm married."

Try as I would, I could not keep my voice steady.

For the first time since our unexpected meeting, the old light flickered in his eyes—personal, avaricious, as if by the hesitation of speech I had told him all he wanted to know.

He smiled suddenly.

"Married? You? You didn't take long in the forgetting of me, did you, ma chérie? As for me—" He shrugged, expressively. "I'm still single."

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

Why hadn't he married the wealthy, beautiful Yvonne?

(Continued on page 31)



I'VE been reading a book, *The World's Greatest Love Stories*. About the great lovers of history—Antony and Cleopatra, Dante and Beatrice, Launcelot and Guinevere—those romances that people still read about, though the lovers are long since dead and gone.

It made me think of my own love story. Maybe it is too ordinary to be compared with Cleopatra's romance—maybe not! But you can judge for yourself. . . .

My wife is sitting on the rug as I write this, head on my lap. She'd been knitting things for the baby—they're lying beside her.

It was she who suggested that I write this, so I rose and came indoors to find pen and paper. Crazy, it may be, but I just felt I had to set down what happened to me . . . not that it can compare with the loves of Cleopatra and Antony—but, well, I just had the hunch I'd like to set down what love can mean to an ordinary bloke like me.

I'm ordinary enough. Chuck Steven, that's me; and I drive the local baker's van.

But I'll begin at the beginning, when I was just Len Steven's kid, running around in ragged pants and a torn jersey. My old man didn't work steady, just picked up a

living where he could find it. Mum was dead, and we lived in a dilapidated shack down by the shore.

I ran wild. Seems I was always in scraps, those days. And I sure knew how to use my mitts. I got into arguments with older, bigger lads, just for the joy of getting a scrap. I'd mix in with anybody—even if they were double my poundage! Sometimes I won, often I took a licking—it was all the same . . . I was learning, learning fast.

My old man taught me all the tricks there was to know. I tried 'em out in those rough-and-tumble fights. Dad taught me well. Somewhere in his varied past he'd travelled through the States with a boxing booth.

"Could have been a champ, Chuck . . ." he'd tell me, with that wry grin twisting his

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lean, haggard face. "Only the booze spoilt my chance. But you got all it takes, kid."

Sure I had. I knew it. There was nothing to stop me.

Then the old man broke a piece of news to me, about the time I lost my job in the local steel mills through getting involved in a scrap with another fellow . . . yes, I was growing up then, big and husky . . . and tough, mighty tough.

"You're fighting at the Sportsdrome to-night, Chuck," Dad told me. "I got you lined up for a supporting bout. Do what I tell you, and you'll be okay. . . ."

I'll never forget that first night. The naked, glaring lights, a mob howling for blood, the taut canvas of the ring—and the huge, hairy brute of a guy who was matched against me . . .

In the five-dollar seats at the ringside—well, I saw a smashing blonde, looking out of place amongst the fight fans all around.

A bent, wrinkled second told me she was Smarty Smith's daughter, and I pulled in my breath some at that. Smith was well known in the town. He'd a finger in a lot of pies—he ran a line of freight trucks, was partner with Lee Cohen in a dance hall, and I'd heard he was going in for boxing promotions in a big way.

And I saw Rita Smith . . . that was her name . . . saw her smile at me, encouraging like, just as the bell clanged for the first round.

That smile did things to me, somehow. I tore into the other guy like I was a tiger, and nothing could stop me. I wanted to show Rita Smith I was tough—and I did, knocking out the other fellow in the third round.

Afterwards, in the bare cubicle that did duty as a dressing-room, I was talking to Dad and a local sports writer, when a knock came to the door. Then the place seemed to overflow with men—stout, flashy men, who smoked big cigars. It took me a moment or two before I recognised Smith, Cohen and another guy I learnt later was their manager.

"I'm putting on a big fight at the Embassy next month," Smarty Smith looked at me, shrewdly. "Want you on the bill. Okay?"

I looked past the fight promoter's bulky figure, and saw Rita hovering in the doorway, looking one hundred per cent lovely in a fur coat that hung open so none of her classy curves would be hidden. She nodded, and smiled, so I told Smith that sure I'd fight at the Embassy. I'd the feeling Rita was behind the invitation—and I was right there, as I learnt later.

That's when we got to know each other really well. I'd shifted training quarters to a gym down-town, where her dad was bringing

on promising fighters. That meant I saw a lot of Rita. In more ways than one.

Gosh, these days, I couldn't think of anything except her. She was so lovely, the sort of girl I'd dreamed about having one day.

Yet it had all seemed so remote, when I was just Len Steven's brat, living in an old shack on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. . . .

Now we roomed in a classy apartment house, for I was really in the money. Those mitts of mine seemed golden, for they brought me plenty dough, as I was matched for more and more fights. I was climbing the ladder fast, getting in amongst the big shots.

"You're swell, darling . . ." Rita whispered in my ear, as we danced in her father's joint one night after I'd halted a promising scrapper from Boston in the fifth round. "Everybody says you are going places. Daddy is mighty pleased you're under contract to him . . . and me, I'm proud of you, Kid . . ."

That's what they called me—Kid Steven. The sporting papers were giving me swell write-ups. But the idea of Rita being proud of me—it bowled me over, so I felt I was in a sort of daze. A smashing dame like her, proud of me! She was so lovely, with blonde hair and the bluest of blue eyes. There wasn't a girl in the hall to touch her for looks . . . and the soft curves of her perfect body were suggestively revealed by the tightness of a sheer silk frock, that was cut daringly low.

"A few more scraps," I boasted, "then I'll have real dough—enough for us to get married on, Rita. You'll marry me, won't you, darling?"

I saw her face cloud over. She gave a nervous little laugh.

"I don't know, Chuck. Marrying—seems so final and lasting. Guess I'm scared. . . ."

I looked at her, steadily. "Don't you love me enough to risk it?"

She smiled, faintly. I thought of all the times she had lain in my arms, sworn she loved me, promising nothing would ever part us . . . yet she said she was scared to marry me . . .

"I'm only kidding," she said, squeezing my arm. "Anyway, time enough for us getting married . . ."

I had to be content with that. Yet I was determined she would marry me—some day! I loved her so much. . . .

* * * *

It was the old man who warned me first. After I'd lost on points to a mauler from the South.

I saw Dad's face was worried, bending over me as I lay on the table in my dressing-room.

"You'll have to cut out the gay times,"

he frowned. "You ain't in training, Chuck . . . that's the truth! Them late nights are telling. Why, you should have chopped that dope into little bits—but you couldn't! The first coupla rounds you was all over him . . . but you couldn't last the pace. I'm warning you, Chuck, you gotta stick to the training."

Flat out on the table, I lay blinking up into the unshaded electric light above my head. The old man was right, I granted him that. Yet his words didn't make any deep impression on me, not even when I lost the next two fights. Because there was Rita . . . who came first with me, always.

Other people told me I was slipping. A sports writer made some cutting comments in his column. I just laughed. For wasn't I right on top of the world?

Until that day . . .

A warm, sunny day, with a blue sky and only a drift of high white clouds. Rita and I lay on the grassy slope near the shore. . . . We'd been swimming, and relaxed now, feeling the sun's warmth dry our damp costumes.

I leaned over Rita, and caught her hand in a strong grip.

"See here, Rita." I knew my voice shook a trifle, but I couldn't help that. "How about us marrying? I got it arranged, Rita. Why put it off any longer?"

She looked at me with those blue eyes—can I ever forget that look? There was content in it . . . maybe some pity, too.

"Marry you?" Her voice was high. "Don't be crazy, Chuck. I wouldn't marry you, ever . . ."

That was a blow to me. I loved Rita so much, you understand? I'd always thought we'd be married, some day.

Infatuated, I didn't pause to remember that I was only Len Steven's youngster, who used to run around in ragged pants. . . . At best, I was a boxer . . . a guy who'd enjoyed the breaks, at first, but was slipping down the ladder faster than he'd climbed it in the first place.

And Rita Smith was somebody—her dad one of the wealthiest and most important people in the town.

"Marry you?" she repeated, and her voice cut into my heart, tearing out huge chunks. "You were all right to have around, Chuck; but I'm not tying myself to you, see? For one thing, you're only a second-rate boxer—and what'll happen when your fighting days are over? No, Chuck, I'm being frank with you. Marriage is out, so far as we're concerned. . . ."

Well, that was plain enough. Rita had been stringing me along, all the time. It tickled her sense of humour to more or less tell me so to my face—I guess she enjoyed watching how I took it, seeing me crumple up, like I'd taken a jab in the middle . . .

I didn't know quite what happened next. Somehow, I managed to laugh, not a nice sort of laugh, but there it was—utterly mirthless, with a high pitch to it. I sensed the amusement in Rita's blue eyes . . . could guess she was enjoying this. And I felt I hated her, in that moment.

Getting to my feet, I looked down at her, agony in my gaze. She said something as I turned away . . . but I was past hearing or caring what she said.

To me, this was the end of everything. The end of life itself. . . .

* * * *

Funny how a disappointment in love reacts on a guy. Some take to drink, others kick over the traces altogether. Me, I just wanted to cut myself adrift from everything that would remind me of Rita.

I threw up the boxing game and travelled to a city about a hundred miles away, where I landed a job in a big auto factory. Hard work—but I loved it. Getting somewhere to live was my biggest headache.

Finally I got a back room off a widow, Mrs. Clancy. She'd a stepdaughter, Molly, who was around nineteen, small and shy, with big, wide, brown eyes. Always, she seemed sort of scared, like she was afraid of something—or mebbe of her stepmother, for a blind man could have seen that Mrs. Clancy didn't treat Molly very kindly.

My room wasn't great shakes, with big, damp splotches on the walls, and only an iron bedstead, a shaky chair and a broken dressing chest. A tattered rug covered the rough floorboards.

Not much, but all I could get. The food was plain awful, except when Molly cooked it. And she could cook.

Things drifted on. I tried to forget about Rita—with little success!

I was lying on top of my unmade bed, smoking, and trying to read a magazine, when I heard sobbing in the other room. Brows furrowed. I swung my feet to the floor, tossing aside the magazine.

I thrust through to the Clancys' kitchen, and saw Molly slumped in a chair, crying her eyes out. Her dress was torn, and I saw red weals on her white flesh. That made me wonder if Mrs. Clancy had been ill-treating the girl while I was at work.

"What's wrong, Molly?" I crossed and touched her shoulder, so she shrank away from me, fear flaming into her brown eyes. When she saw who it was, something of the fear vanished.

She couldn't speak, not for a moment. I sensed she was trembling, and tried to soothe her.

Brokenly, she sobbed out the nasty story.

"It—it is Bart Cassidy . . . you know who I mean?" She looked at me with her wide eyes, and I nodded.

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Cassidy was a bad lot; a widower, who lived further down the street. I'd heard plenty about him, and he'd a prison record for offences against girls.

"Bart Cassidy . . . wants me to go and stay with him—as his housekeeper . . ." Molly sobbed out. "Ma is trying to make me go—but I won't! Won't . . ."

My teeth clicked together. Molly—and that brute! I knew what it meant . . . his housekeeper! And Ma Clancy was trying to force Molly into going . . . I could guess why, knowing Cassidy had been winning on the gee-gees, for he'd been drinking all the past week; he'd pay Ma Clancy well for making Molly go to him. . . .

I smothered an impulse to break things.

"Ma—she's gone round to fetch Bart Cassidy right now . . ." Molly sobbed, and I put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"You'll be all right," I assured her, for pity surged over in my heart, and I was determined that I'd see Molly was all right. My mind sought a way of escape for her—then I had a breath-taking idea.

Neither Molly nor I had much to live for in this crazy old world. Our stake didn't amount to much. In a sense, our positions were similar.

"Get your things packed," I told her, with a smile. "They won't do this to you, Molly. I'll take you away. Listen, kid—we'll be married, see? Then everything will be okay."

She looked at me, just as if she couldn't believe it was true.

"Married—Chuck . . . you'd marry me?"

"Sure! Anything to say against it?" I joked.

Molly shook her head. Love was in her eyes, now; I saw it there, crystal clear. Gosh, the girl was head over heels in love with me! Crazy me—I might have noticed it before, only I was so worried about Rita that I never could get around to thinking of anything else. . . .

I waited while Molly threw her pitifully few belongings into a battered case. A check skirt, two faded print frocks, a box that once held candles, scraps of ribbon . . . various odds and ends . . .

We were just leaving when Ma Clancy returned, and close behind her was Cassidy, an ugly, bloated mountain of a man, unshaven, his piggy eyes peering from behind puffed cheeks.

Mrs. Clancy gave me a nasty look, then her eyes travelled beyond me to Molly, who was hugging her case.

She called the girl a vile name, demanding to know where she was going.

"Molly's going with me," I grunted. "We're to be married, see? And just you try to stop us . . ."

Bart Cassidy started forward, his hairy



For once Bart had picked a loser—a crashing uppercut sent him sprawling

fists twitching, mouthing threats to batter me to pulp.

For once, Bart had picked a loser. I hadn't his brute strength, but too much drink had bloated him. Besides, I knew how to use my mitts. Dodging the clumsy pass he made, I weaved in, landing successive short-arm jabs that battered his ugly face to bleeding pulp. A crashing uppercut slammed against his chin, sending him sprawling across a table, which broke beneath his weight, and he pitched to the floor, where he lay still.

Then I took Molly's arm, picking up my own case, which was already packed. We walked out then.

Guess it was like a dream to Molly, us being married by a preacher in his front room. She clung to me, eyes starry, and I could feel the thudding of her heart.

Poor kid. She looked up into my face, after the ceremony, and her eyes were brimming over with tears.

"Wh-what've I done to deserve this?" she stammered. "Oh, Chuck, I can't thank you enough, ever . . ."

"Forget it," I said, uneasily, for I hated having folks thank me. "It was just, oh heck . . . just time I was wed an' settled down! And you happened to be on the spot . . ."

A strange thing to say on my wedding-day . . . but I said it! Guess it was a strange wedding, too, come to think of it.

* * * *

We were lucky, and got a couple furnished rooms off a bloke who worked alongside me in the auto factory; his house was too big for his wife to keep, with her working, too. So we moved in there. Reckon Molly was the happiest girl in the city when she had two rooms of her own . . . and, gosh, the furniture was shifted around, every time I came home. . . .

Not long afterwards, the clerk at the window of the factory time office said there was a telegram for me. Taking it, I walked through the gates, slitting open the envelope.

When I saw the message . . . gosh, you can imagine the tumult I felt . . .

"DARLING . . ." ran the message, "I LOVE YOU. SÖRRY FOR EVERYTHING. WILL MARRY YOU, SWEETHEART. ALL LOVE.—RITA."

Yeah, that's what it was—from Rita, the girl who'd turned me down!

And now she had changed her mind . . . too late! She wanted to marry me—when I was married already to another girl!

Course Rita didn't know that . . . she'd got the factory address from Dad, but I hadn't yet written to tell him I was married, so Rita didn't know that I already had a wife!

* * * *

What a position to be in! I still loved

Rita—I always would, I reckoned—yet here I was tied to another woman! A woman who had first claim on me, by law.

A bitterness welled up inside me—bitterness against Molly, whom I unreasonably blamed for this awful mess I found myself in! Poor Molly, the little friendless kid, whom I had married out of pity, thinking the only woman in my life didn't want me. . . .

I blamed Molly for it all. That night—well, I went drinking . . . had to do something to try and drown the misery in my heart.

When at last I got back to the rooms we rented, I'm afraid I . . . but I'll skip that. It isn't nice to think about even.

How I must have hurt small, sensitive Molly, telling her I wished I hadn't married her, that I'd be getting a divorce soon as I could . . .

Sometimes, even yet, I see her pale, stricken face, and seems I'll never shut it out, the agony in her eyes as she stared at me, clasping both hands against a heart that must have been broken.

"Chuck . . . you're drunk! Don't know what you're saying . . ." she gasped out.

I swayed on my feet, eyes red-rimmed and cruel—I could see my reflection in the mirror opposite, and it wasn't nice to see.

Then I flung the telegram form in her face.

"Sure . . . I mean it," I told her, thickly. "I just married you . . . from pity! Nothing else! I love somebody else . . . and she wants to marry me. Yet I'm tied to you . . ."

She didn't say any more. Just gave a gasp and turned to run through to the bedroom. I heard the bed-springs creak, as she flung herself down, headlong, then awful sobs, hard and dry, like they were tearing Molly's slender body to bits.

And I slumped into a fireside chair. Guess I slept, for it was the middle of the night when my eyes blinked open. I was cold and stiff—from the other room came Molly's sobs, for she hadn't stopped . . .

I swore, vividly, thinking this was one heckuva mess I was in . . .

* * * *

Weeks followed that weren't happy ones. They could not be anything else, with Molly a pale ghost of herself, and me going around like a bear with a sore head. I'd better skip the details of those awful weeks . . . they weren't nice, not for either Molly or me. Especially for Molly—I guess, most nights, she cried herself to sleep.

I hadn't answered Rita's message. A letter came: it said she wanted me to marry her, right away, for she'd discovered that she loved me above everything else. I was all that mattered in her life.

But I didn't answer that, either. How could I? There was nothing to say. I

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couldn't explain about Molly—all I could do was rave and curse at the poor kid, making her life a misery.

Once she even said she wished she'd gone to Cassidy; even that did not sober me, but I flung back in her teeth that I wished to heck she had. . . .

God, those were awful days, for her. Me, I was past caring. All I could think of was Rita, who loved me so much—and I couldn't reply to her letter. . . .

Rita, who would have made me the happiest man in the world.

And now . . .

My frustrated love for Rita spilled over, gnawing at me, nagging into my mind that I'd got a raw deal from life, marrying Molly out of pity.

I'd thought of a divorce, but that seemed out, for Molly wouldn't give me one. Besides, it would take time—I couldn't ask Rita to wait that long. . . .

Then my father died. Suddenly, so I never got a chance to be with him at the end. All I could do was travel through to arrange the funeral. I was glad I'd made his last few years happy, for I'd kept on sending him money, so he could stay on in the rooming house, where he'd be well fed and looked after.

The funeral was simple, touching. When it was over, I went round to the rooming house with Bill Sorby, a cousin, for we'd have to go through Dad's belongings. Checking through drawers, Bill began to chat about the latest titbits of gossip. I hardly listened, not until he mentioned a particular name.

"Hear about Rita Smith?" he said, and my heart sort of stood still. "Used to be the girl-friend, didn't she?"

I nodded, a sick ache in my heart. Deliberately, I held away my head, so Bill wouldn't see the light flickering in my eyes.

"You are sure well quit of her," he went on, surprisingly. "She was a bad lot, was Rita . . ."

That rocked me back on my heels, sending my head snapping round to stare blankly at my cousin.

"What d'you mean?" I demanded.

Bill shrugged his broad shoulders. He gave a low laugh—uneasily, sort of.

"Oh, she came a cropper. Got tied up with a married man. There was a baby coming—the guy skinned out, see? Soon as he knew what was to happen. Rita went crazy, kinda . . . tried to get some other sucker to marry her. Everything was fixed for her marrying Jed Skinner, only he got told 'bout the married guy, so he sheered off . . ."

My heart gave a sudden leap. Rita in trouble! A married man responsible . . . her desperately trying to hook some poor fish who'd be had for a sucker . . .

"When—when did this happen?" I demanded.

Bill thought a moment, scratching his mop of reddish hair.

"Aw, a while back. Let me think . . ." Then he named a date.

Yes—approximately the date that had been on the letter she wrote me! That letter saying she still loved me—that she'd marry me, right away!

I'll say she would! To hide her own shame!

That's the sort of girl Rita had been . . . selfish, out for her own ends, all the time!

I'd have fallen for her wiles, too . . . if I'd been still single! Wouldn't have known about the baby—not until it was too late! Wouldn't have known I was marrying a girl soon to bear another guy's child . . .

What would our marriage have been—in those circumstances?

I shuddered to think of it.

And this selfish, worthless woman . . . she was coming between Molly and I! Poor, sweet, gentle Molly . . . the suffering I had caused her, in my madness. . . .

That's what it amounted to . . . madness, all of it!

Poor Molly—her love was the real thing, something fragile and precious, that I'd done my best to kill . . .

Oh, I realised all that, now. It made me feel lower than a snake's belly.

Molly's love was so good and pure, rising above self, a love that would last for always, growing richer and more wonderful with the passing of the years . . .

That was Molly's love—the love I had so nearly destroyed in my utter foolishness . . .

Trains could not take me back quickly enough to Molly. I went down on my knees to her, begged to be forgiven, as I stammered out some sort of explanation, praying she would understand and forgive . . .

For I knew now I loved Molly, loved her just as surely as she loved me.

She forgave me . . . simply, without questions or reproach. Because she loved me.

So . . . that's our love story—mine and Molly's. A love story that wouldn't have had a happy ending, if the scales hadn't been lifted from my eyes in the nick of time. But they were, thank God . . . and now we have found a perfect happiness and contentment in a love that is—to us—the most wonderful thing in the world.

I said at the beginning that Molly was busy knitting tiny garments as I started to write this. Yes, there'll be another chapter starting to our particular love story, mighty soon. A wonderfully exciting chapter, this.

Molly, she hopes it will be a boy.

Me . . . I'm not caring—so long as Molly is happy, then I'll be contented. . . .

THE END



JOE BURNS and I had known each other ever since our schooldays. We'd grown up together. Mebbe that was why it was inevitable we should be sweethearts. Anyway, that's how it turned out.

Oh, there was nothing romantic or exciting about Joe. He was a broad, stocky chap, of medium height, and rugged, grinning features, topped by a shock of wavy fair hair that no cap could subdue.

He started on his own, with an old broken-down motor lorry, and was soon doing so well he replaced the original truck with two heavier vehicles, bought on the hire-purchase system. It meant he had to work hard to keep up the instalments and show a profit for himself.

So I began to see less and less of Joe. He broke dates with me, and then would be all apology next time I saw him.

"Gosh, forgive me, Nan," he'd say, with

that crooked, friendly grin of his. "I got the chance of a load going Birmingham way, so I clamped down on it. More for the old money-box, you know."

But I began to get fed up of this neglect. It wasn't fair, I reckoned. I worked hard in a shop all day, and was looking forward to a cinema or a show at night, and there I was waiting vainly for a sweetheart who didn't show up. An evening spoilt!

Did Joe think more of his rotten old business than of me? I began to wonder that—and everything seemed to point to that being the way of it!

Then came the night he was taking me to a dance. It was a swell affair, for some local charity, and they'd got an extra special band down from London. I'd been looking forward to it for ages. You know how it is.

And here I was standing like a lost soul at the corner of Woodstock Street, waiting—waiting for Joe!

"I'll be there," were his last words. "I won't let you down, not this time. I'll be there on the dot. For once, the business can go to pot! I'm taking my girl to a dance!"

I looked at my watch, the watch Joe had given me for my twenty-first. He was late, nearly an hour overdue.

Oh, I was a fool for putting up with this! Any other girl would have given him his books, long ago! But me, kind, soft-hearted Nan, was being turned into an ordinary

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doormat . . . trampled on, made to feel I was of less importance in Joe's life than his two Dodge motor trucks!

"I'm through with him!" I vowed, with a toss of my head. "He—he can stick to his blinking lorries! Marry one of 'em!"

It was just then somebody bumped into me. Somebody tall and dark and handsome. Yes, he was, like a movie hero; the type that takes one's breath away. And he raised his hat and gave me a smile that was all friendliness and flashing white teeth.

"So sorry—afraid I wasn't looking where I was going," he said, in a peculiarly attractive voice that reminded me oddly of my favourite radio announcer.

"That's all right. It was my fault, too. I—I was so angry, I—I—I didn't look what was coming . . ."

He looked at me, keenly. I saw sudden interest flame into his dark eyes. His lips curved into a grin.

"And why should you be so angry? What is there to get all hot and bothered about?" he asked.

Well, I felt I had to get something off my chest. My rage against Joe was simmering, just ready to boil right over.

"You'd be angry, too, if you waited an hour and a half for somebody who don't turn up!" I flung at him. "Angry? I'm plain raving mad!"

"Gee, that's too bad. Say, it so happens I'm at a loose end, too. What say I take you to that dance in the town hall? That's where you were going, if I guess correctly."

I hesitated. I'd never have taken the invitation, only I was boiling mad at Joe. Don't think I was the sort who'd pick up any man in the street. This was the first time I'd ever done such a thing. And I did feel a little qualm of fear as I accepted the invitation.

So that was how I met Ronnie Rutherford. Just like that. He was so different from anybody else I knew. He had poise and assurance, so unlike Joe. He was alive, pulsating, exciting . . . he just had to look at me to make me feel all weak at the knees.

I'll never forget that dance. It seemed heaven, to be circling the floor in Ronnie's arms, my head on his shoulder. Then they dimmed the lights for a twilight waltz. And he expertly guided me into a dark corner, and there he kissed me.

Oh, that kiss! So different from Joe's half-scared pecks. This kiss was the beginning and end of everything. It made time stand still. I just wanted to be like this for ever, in Ronnie's arms, his hot, crushing lips against mine . . . to hear his whispered compliments, his assurance that he'd fallen in love with me, that first moment he'd seen me standing at the street corner . . . he confessed he'd bumped into me on purpose, just to get a change of speaking!

Oh, he was a fast worker, was Ronnie. He had my head in a whirl, for I was swept off my feet with the strength and passion of his love-making. . . .

* * * *

The next few weeks were spent as if I was living a dream, a grand, lovely dream, in which only one thing mattered, and that was Ronnie's love for me.

One day I met Joe. He gave me a queer, twisted grin, half-ashamed. Somebody had told him about Ronnie, I knew.

"About that night of the dance . . ." he began, uneasily. "I—I was out at Bury, Nan, and the truck broke down . . . it was nearly midnight before I got the engine sorted and back to the yard. I'm sorry . . . there was no way I could let you know."

I was already walking past him. He didn't matter at all. He was just somebody who'd filled up the time until Ronnie came along.

"It doesn't matter," I flung over my shoulder, "don't give it a thought, Joe."

I heard him call my name . . . but I just walked on. I was walking out of Joe's life, I knew that . . .

But I wasn't worrying about him. Nothing worried me, now. I was in love, really and truly in love—or so I was foolish enough to think!

I didn't realise then that there were men like Ronnie Rutherford, who'd play on a young girl's emotions with their smooth, experienced love-making, raising her passion to a pitch beyond control. He didn't love me—that was all make-believe—a part played to fulfil his own wicked purpose.

Oh, what a narrow escape I'd had. I shiver when I think of it. If I'd given in to his impassioned entreaties, allowed myself to be swayed by his demanding love-making . . .

But I didn't . . . thank God I had enough sense for that. Though I shudder to think of what might have happened, if it hadn't been my eyes were suddenly opened.

Ronnie and I were standing outside my "digs" one night when two men came down the street. Tall, burly men, in blue double-breasted suits, and hats pulled down low on their foreheads.

"Better come quietly, Rutherford." One of them tapped Ronnie on the shoulder. We've got the goods on you this time. Been round at your lodgings, and your landlady said you'd probably be here. Telling the old tale to another dame, eh? They was always your weakness . . ."

I couldn't believe my ears! These men were detectives, arresting Ronnie!

I looked at him. He shrugged his shoulders, seeming to be quite at ease. It gave me the impression this wasn't the first time he had been arrested.

Wildly, I asked the detective what it was all about. He told me—plenty. Rutherford

was wanted on a charge of fraud. Also for deserting his wife and two children in Leeds!

He was a married man! His talk of us getting married . . . the grand plans he made . . . they were all false . . . for he couldn't marry me!

I don't suppose I was the first girl to be so cruelly deceived—not the last, either! It's happening every day. But that didn't make me feel any better.

I was hurt, cruelly hurt. This was the end of everything for me, I felt. I was glad my parents weren't alive to know how foolish I'd been. For I'd made such a mess of my life. In such a small place tongues would wag; gossips would add bits and pieces on to the story, until everything was distorted to make me appear as bad as Rutherford.

Then Joe came into the shop where I worked. He looked nervous and ill at ease.

"I—I was sorry to hear about it, Nan," he stumbled. "Gosh, if I can do anything . . ."

His sympathy made me worse. I felt enraged at Joe. After all, I got around to thinking, if he had turned up that night, I would never have met Rutherford.

"You can't do anything," I told him. "Close the door as you go out; it's draughty in here."

Joe flinched as if I'd struck him. He turned and walked out; his face was white and tensely set.

Yes, I knew I was being foolish. Yet I felt that things couldn't ever be the same between Joe and I, not now.

Oh, I had to get away. That was what I did . . . got away from it all! I became a probationer nurse in a big hospital somewhere in the North. Here, surely, I would manage to forget the past . . . and, above all, forget the ache in my heart. . . .

Work at the hospital was heavy, especially for us probationers, for there were lectures and classes to attend, sandwiched between our duties in the wards.

Still, we did have some off duty, though most of that time was spent in our little cubicles at the nurses' home, swotting up lectures from our notebooks.

I was glad I was so busy. It helped take my mind off things. . . .

* * * *

Time passed, and I realised that I couldn't forget Joe Burns!

Always, I had a picture of him before my eyes, and I couldn't put him out of my thoughts.

"Nan! You're crazy!" I told myself. "Forget about him! Plenty other pebbles on the beach. . . ."

I tried to be gay, going to dances, enjoying myself with the other nurses . . . but there was always something lacking, no matter how I tried to get forgetfulness, los-

ing myself, desperately, in this mad, crazy whirl of pleasure-seeking.

But at nights I lay awake in my own little cubicle, and I'd stare at the green walls, seeing mirrored there only one face . . . Joe's rugged, homely face.

For, gosh, I loved Joe. I knew that, now. It was real love, the steady, constant love that will survive for always. It didn't dawn on me suddenly, this realisation of what love really was. It just sort of grew, until I knew there could be no doubt about it.

All I wanted in life was to belong to Joe, to have his comforting arms around me, my head pillowed on his chest, and him kissing my hair, the way it used to be when we lay on the river-bank on a warm summer evening.

At length I could bear it no longer. I put in for the holidays I was due . . . and the train couldn't take me back quick enough . . . for I was returning to Joe!

My heart thumped madly as I walked across the square to Joe's garage. A green truck stood outside. I felt a sudden wave of happiness surge through me.

And there was Joe, same as ever, his stocky figure clad in stained brown overalls. He looked round and saw me. I was near enough to see his eyes light up . . . then the light died out as suddenly as it had come.

"Joe! Gee, it's swell to see you again!" I cried.

Joe didn't take me in his arms, like my heart was crying out for him to do. He just stared at me, almost blankly.

"Yes, it's swell," he said, slowly. "Been changes since you went away."

I stared at him. What did he mean? A sudden fear stabbed my heart.

"How? What changes?" I asked.

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Well, Nan, I—I'm a married man now. Got married last month to Lily Patterson . . ."

My knees went weak. This was too cruel! Joe married! But it couldn't be . . .

It was though. The fact beat into my brain. It etched itself for good on my heart. Joe married!

Queer, I'd never expected this. It was the last of my thoughts.

"Staying long?" Joe asked, quietly.

I shook my head. "No . . . I—I'm getting the next train out." I told him, desperately, "I—I just got a few hours' leave. Well, Joe, it—it's been nice seeing you . . ."

I turned and walked away. Hot tears scalded my eyelids. I walked blindly, not caring where my faltering steps took me, so long as I got away from Joe. My bleeding heart contained an eternity of suffering; I would never recover from this hurt—never! How cruel it was! Even to think of Joe married to somebody else caused me untold pain.

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Because I loved Joe, had loved him all along. He was the one man in the world for me. There could never be anybody else. Life wasn't worth living, not now, when the man I loved was married to someone else. The future seemed dark and gloomy, stretching miserably ahead through the bleak, empty years of loneliness . . .

* * * *

Back on duty I found time seemed to drag as if it was never going to pass. I couldn't work up an interest in anything; even my work was dull and flat, and previously I'd been able to fling myself wholeheartedly into my job of nursing sick people back to health . . . not that I neglected my patients . . . sister saw to that.

One day I slipped into town, meaning to do some shopping. Went into a café for coffee—it was a cold, raw day, so I would be glad of something to put warmth back into my chilled body.

There weren't many vacant chairs, so I sat down at the nearest table. Something like Fate was at work there, I suppose, making me sit just there . . .

For a tall, lanky fellow slid into the chair opposite. He only had to speak for me to know he was an American.

"Hope you don't mind, sister," he grinned. "Place is kinda crowded, an' this is the only empty chair I see around."

That was how I met Slim. Just a big, raw Yank from Texas, over here to buy some pedigree livestock for his uncle's ranch.

And Slim seemed to sort of slide into my life, as if it was entirely natural. I couldn't have done anything about it—even if I wanted to!

Slim seemed to take me for granted, and walked back to the hospital gates with me.

"See you Toosday," he drawled. "Three o'clock suit? We'll go somewhere and dance . . . I got a car. Things are hung up here, meanwhile, for the breeder I aim to talk business with is down South on some other deal. Means I gotta hang around—not that I mind that, now . . . So it's a date, Toosday?"

Well, it was a date. I couldn't refuse him. Slim was a real pal . . . I thought a lot about him.

Then Tuesday. He had a smart, rakish car, and we drove to the Horseshoe Roadhouse. It was half-day off.

I was wonderfully happy . . . until Slim reached into his bulky wallet, producing pictures of his wife and kiddie!

Oh, he didn't try to deceive me; Slim was too honest for that.

"Mebbe you don't wanna see me again, huh?" looking at me, his eyes screwed up, "knowing I'm a married guy? Gee, but I hope you don't take it thataway . . . we could be real friends, Nan . . ."

I hesitated. Then nodded, slowly. "Well, we can be—just friends . . ." I told him, and that was how I was determined it would be!

Only it wasn't easy, being just friends with a man like Slim. He was so excitingly good-looking, and his easy manner fascinated me, too . . .

When he took me in his arms one night, I couldn't have stopped him . . . not for a fortune! It was like going into a haven of refuge, to feel his strong arms clasping me to him, against the roughness of his tweed jacket, and the way his grey eyes were shining . . .

He kissed me . . . a warm, vibrant kiss, that made my heart overflow . . . all the passion in the world was bound up in that kiss . . .

Then he released me. He was shaken; the rigid lines of his face showed that.

"I shouldn't have done that . . ." He gave a groan. "It ain't fair to you, Nan . . ."

But I was past thinking about that . . . My arms stole up around his neck, pulling his lips down to mine . . .

"It—it don't mean anything . . ." I whispered. "We aren't doing any harm."

My heart tried to say that was true—we didn't do wrong, stealing those kisses . . .

Yet my conscience pricked me, as I remembered Slim's wife and child . . . but I gave myself up to the sweetness of Slim's thrilling kisses. . . .

It was later in the same week that Slim told me he had settled his business in the town.

"I'm heading up to London for the week-end," he drawled. "Always had a notion to see that city. . . ."

Before I knew it, I burst out: "Oh, I got a week-end pass next Friday . . ."

He looked at me, his lips quirked.

"That—sort of ties up, don't it? Nan, couldn't you . . . come with me, to London?"

I knew what he meant . . . it took my breath away. Up to now, there had been nothing but kisses. . . .

His suggestion was unexpected. Yet, was it?

For I had the feeling this had been meant, right from the beginning of time . . . Slim and I . . .

I trembled. This meant so much to me . . . could I do it? Snatch a few precious days of happiness with Slim?

His wife need never know! There was nobody else concerned. . . .

Strangely, I thought then of Joe Burns. But he was married! That was what made my mind up for me . . .

"Okay, Slim . . ." I nodded. "I—I'll come with you—for the week-end . . ."

* * * *

Friday came. I booked off duty, and went over to the nurses' home to pack. I tumbled

a few things into a case—then stopped, suddenly.

Beneath some filmy underthings in a drawer was a framed photograph . . . a picture of rugged, grinning Joe Burns!

Something stabbed my heart, right then.

I knew I couldn't go through with this, going away for a week-end with Slim. It was letting Joe down. . . .

Even if Joe was married, I still loved him! I couldn't go away with another man, not loving Joe . . .

Even if I couldn't have Joe, I could keep myself good and decent—the way he would want me to be! Tears blinded me, as I threw my things back into the drawer, snapping shut the case and slipping it below the white bedstead. . . .

I wasn't spending the week-end with Slim! I would 'phone his hotel and explain—he would understand. And I wouldn't see Slim again, ever . . .

When I 'phoned, I sensed relief in Slim's voice—he was glad I hadn't gone through with it! Yes, we would both have regretted it to the end of our days if we had gone away together for a stolen week-end . . .

Happiness isn't obtained that way. Not real, genuine happiness such as every woman craves . . .

So, I never saw Slim again . . .

And—well, strange how Fate takes a hand in things!

For, not long afterwards, Nurse Smith came into the ward where I was changing a dressing.

"There's a visitor downstairs for you," she said, breathlessly. "I'll take over. He's in the waiting-room, at the porter's lodge."

A visitor! I went down, wondering who it could be . . .

In the waiting-room, a stocky figure in brown overalls stood staring out of the window, his back to me. He turned—his name leapt to my lips, wildly . . .

"Joe! Joe Burns! What—whatever are you doing here?"

He caught my hand; the pressure of his fingers sent my heart thudding madly.

"I came up to see you, Nan. Came through this way with a truck; made a point of looking you up. Had to tell you . . . something . . . Oh, I got your address from Mrs. Midley—she'd had a letter from you . . ."

I stared at him, wildly. Why had he gone to such trouble to seek me out?

"There's something I wanted to tell you." His voice was tense. "About my marriage. It was a mistake, right from the beginning . . . for us both! We were never meant for each other—we both realised that! And Lily met somebody she really loves . . ."

"Yes?" I looked at him.

"Well, I got a divorce," Joe said, quietly.

"It'll be through, before long. Then I'll be free."

Heart thudding, I asked: "How long, Joe, before it comes through?"

"Six weeks or so . . ." he replied. "Nan, you are the only one I ever loved . . . do you think . . .?"

I looked at him steadily.

"I got a leave in a couple of months, Joe. I'll be back, then . . . staying with Mrs. Midley."

"And—we can start where we left off?" asked Joe. . . .

There wasn't any need for me to put my answer in words . . . my shiny eyes told him all he wanted to know!

And Joe swept me into his arms, hungrily, to kiss me . . . the kiss I'd been waiting for, all this long, weary time. . . .

I was where I belonged, in the arms of the one man I loved above all others. This time I knew it was for always. . . .

My heart sang, rejoicing because I could go to Joe good and decent, for I'd had the strength of will to keep from going away with Slim, which might have spoilt the happiness that Joe and I have, now. . . .

Yes, we're married, now . . . and I wrote this in the time of waiting, before our first baby is born. . . .

THE END

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By "THE SECRETARY OF A
LONELY HEART'S CLUB"

I SUPPOSE what first gave me the idea of starting a "Lonely Hearts" Club was the fact that I was so lonely myself. Until I was twenty-five I looked after an aged aunt, who needed constant attention. When she passed away and left me her house and a very comfortable income, I realised I hadn't had much chance of meeting men, and I was entirely alone in the world now. Nor did I know how to go about meeting men. I had no friends to speak of, and was a poor dancer.

I needed a hobby, and it struck me suddenly that there must be a great many lonely people, both men and women, like myself.

I gave the plan some thought for the next three weeks, and then I had notepaper printed, bought a filing cabinet, and inserted an advertisement in a National magazine dealing with psychological subjects.

"Are you lonely or depressed?" it read. "It may be that you need fresh interests, new friends. But friends are not easy to make—and then you may not find the right type of friends. The 'Union' Club exists solely for the purpose of making fresh contacts for YOU; contacts with people of your own frame of mind, who will be interested in the things you are interested in; each member is carefully filed as to age, sex and details of hobbies and interests. The members are then matched, and an introduction or preliminary letter exchange arranged. Payment for this service is a mere 2/6 enrolment fee. No further charges. The Club is not a money-making concern, existing as it does solely to bring a little companionship into the lives of lonely people. Write to the address above today."

* / * *

The replies came, at first, in their tens, then their hundreds. After four weeks I had more than three hundred clients registered, and more arriving by each post.

It was a full time job arranging and classifying them. I had to hire a young office girl to help me.

There was the man who was "stoutish, middle-aged, and with a good job, like to meet widow, or spinster, attractive, indulgent, and not too old to have forgotten what love is like. . . ." I had to smile at that.

Then the Irish girl fresh to the country, working as a domestic servant in Islington.

She wanted a "young man, no funny business about him, and good looking. I haven't no friends here, and it's lonely for me. I'm sending my 2/6 that you ask for when I get my first week's wages."

Another interesting one was a titled gentleman, who was very frank in his letter. "I'm not handsome by any means—perhaps I might even say I was ugly. But if you can introduce me to a lady companion, who will be able to converse intelligently with my friends, and who has mixed in a higher social life, I will be delighted to reward you. . . ."

Some were evident for what their writers were. One:

" . . . Fifty years of age and recently suffered the sad loss of my wife. I am a busy man, with little outside interest apart from my business. I would like a well-preserved widow, or a woman of broad views and understanding, who would be willing to serve as a companion-housekeeper. . . ."

Such letters I threw into the wastepaper basket. Then I got busy sorting the others and pairing them off.

No matter what harsh and cynical critics may say of clubs like the one I was running, it is a fact that many happy meetings, friendships, and even marriages, are arranged through them. Not all the meetings are successful, of course; but, in the case of my own club, at least eighty-two per cent. were suitable.

During the first year twenty meetings I arranged ended in marriage, fifty-two fizzled out, thirty-seven got off to a good start, with regular dates, and sixteen were entirely unsuitable. A remaining forty-seven couples quite liked their partners, but had no idea of marrying them.

I myself worked hard with all this. It really was a big job, but it fascinated me. Sometimes my club members called personally to state exactly what they had in mind, and at such times I tried to appear tactful and understanding, except with men and women who were obviously out only for what they could get.

For example, a thirty-nine year old bachelor wrote in to say that he had a job, live in at his flat, for a secretary who must possess the "qualifications" (?) of being young, broadminded, and pretty, with a good figure. Her shorthand, typing, or even previous experience, were not really necessary!

I wrote back very coldly to this man, explaining that I ran a very decent agency, and not an employment bureau.

So big did the whole thing become that I found less time than ever to get out and meet people. I didn't have to. People came right into my own home in the shape of their letters, revealing their other side, their natures and personalities and desires. I learned far more about life from the correspondence than I could ever have done from meeting a million people.

But, of course, this didn't advance my own interests. Funnily enough, I never had the nerve to try and pair myself off. You'd have thought that would have been one of my first moves, for some of the letters from young men were genuine and sincere; young men who ached for the company of a girl friend, and were too shy to ask anyone they already knew for a date.

No, I was still "out of it" as far as adjusting my own life was concerned. But I wasn't worrying.

At least, not until Jerry Barker happened along. . . .

* * *

Jerry Barker was about six foot tall, quiet, well groomed and moneyed. His job was connected with exporting toys, and he seemed to have plenty of time to spare for other interests.

He called one Saturday morning when, actually, the office was closed. But as I opened the door to him myself, and he asked if I was the secretary of the club, I could hardly refuse to see him.

"I saw your advert in 'Psychological Times'," he explained, "a journal I'm very interested in myself. I thought perhaps you could be of help to me—object NOT matrimony."

I said: "This isn't literally a matrimonial agency. Or, at least, that isn't its primary function—just a side issue."

He smiled at me. He said, "I feel I can talk easily to you. You understand how it is to be—lonely?"

I didn't know how he'd guessed I was lonely, but I nodded.

He went on: "I'm really damnably lonely, personally. Always have been—plenty of men friends, of course, but none of the opposite sex. I may not sound it now, but whenever I meet a girl in whom I'm interested I stammer and stutter and bark like the dickens. It's embarrassing, and, furthermore, it means I never get any further towards marriage."

"I thought your object wasn't matrimony?" I said.

"Nor is it. At least, not with any of the club members. But I have an idea as to how I might rid myself of this frightful feeling of embarrassment which grips me in the

presence of the fairer sex. In short, I thought that if you could arrange, say, a dozen dates, with as many pretty girls of your club, who won't think I want to marry them, well—it wouldn't matter much if I did make an ass of myself in front of them, would it? And after a dozen dates I might begin to lose this infernal shyness that gets hold of me. So that when the right girl does come along I'll be able to tell her she is the right one without sounding as if I'm suffering from a bad case of plum in the mouth. See what I mean?"

"Yes," I agreed, "I do. And, as a matter of fact, I do have some fifty girls on the books, who're lonely just for a friend. Some of them are already engaged, with boys away at sea, and that kind of thing—some looking for intellectual companionship."

He grinned. "Don't wish any of those on to me. Nor any of the ones already engaged. I don't want to trifle with other chaps' girl friends."

I said, "I'll make out a list for you if you'll leave your name and address. Then you can select the girls you'd like to date, and I'll arrange the meetings. All right?"

He got up and shook my hand. "Thanks. You're a sport."

I smiled at him. "I hope this will effect the cure you want."

"We'll see," he said.

"It might even happen that the girl you want will be amongst those you choose," I added.

He shook his head. "It might be—but I doubt it. Although I'm so shy, I have my ideal —"

I laughed and saw him out. When he had gone I sat back and thought what an attractive man he was. . . .

* * *

His first half dozen dates came and went. At the end of each one he'd slip in to see me, perhaps the next morning.

His first was a date from Chelsea—a young girl who was working in a store whilst saving money to take a course at art school.

He came in the next morning mopping his brow.

"Phew! I thought you said she wanted company only?"

"So she stated in her letter," I said, surprised.

He groaned. "Don't wish anything more like her on to me. She wrapped herself round me so tight it's a wonder I didn't need a trained nurse to peel her off! I was just saying goodnight at her door and then she insisted on my coming up to her room. When I got there she all but pounced on me and cried: 'Let's be ourselves, darling'—and I had the devil's own time of it for the next ten minutes trying to get clear without hurting her feelings."

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I smiled. "I'm sorry. I'll strike her from the books."

"Good show. It's a pity you can't paddle her, too. A young kid like that up to those tricks."

I said: "But, seriously, how did you get on? Did you manage to control your nervousness?"

"No," he said, pulling a wry face. "I stammered like anything. Got all flustered."

I nodded sympathetically. "Well, it may wear off in time. Now your second is a girl of twenty-eight from Ealing. She's a nurse, or, rather, has been. I believe from her letters that her fiance was killed during the war, so handle her with kid gloves."

"I'll buy a pair," he nodded.

"Good. Here's the time and place, and other details—"

* * *

The next time he dropped in, after his nurse date, he was very thoughtful.

"How was she?" I asked. "Help your shyness any?"

He nodded in a preoccupied way.

"The poor kid's suffering, you know. I would say she's still feeling like hell about her fiance getting killed that way. She's trying her hardest to get over it, but she goes into long and moody silences, when she isn't even there at all, mentally. But she helped me a great deal—I suppose her very manner set me at my ease. She even talked about her boy, after a while."

I said, "Like another date with her?"

"No, I think not. I wouldn't like her to think I was dating her regularly."

"Then she isn't the one for you, eh?" I smiled.

"No, she isn't."

His next date was with a barmaid—quite a nice girl. But he shook his head when he called to report.

"She was asking me to marry her within ten minutes of our meeting," he said. "She also had a barmaid's holiday. . . ."

"What on earth is that?"

He chuckled. "Wouldn't go to dine and dance. Just insisted on lodging herself in a West End pub, with her arm linked in mine to prevent me getting away, and then sat there ordering double-ports the whole night until closing time."

"Mind you, she was a jolly kind of kid. But that determination to hook someone was what upset me. She even invited me round to her family's place for supper, and asked when she'd see me again. I told her the agency would arrange that. . . ."

"Are you seeing her again, then?"

"I am not. You got me into it. You can get me out. What's next on the list?"

And so it went on for the next month, until the list of twelve was ended, and he'd

been out with practically every type of girl I could think of, or get hold of.

His last report to me was the morning after his last date.

"Nice kid," he told me. "Wanted to knit me a pullover and spent the entire night telling me how fond of children she was."

I laughed. "And how did you get on? Still nervous?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I was okay. I've lost all that embarrassment now. I thought the idea might prove fruitful."

"Do you want me to arrange any further dates?" I said.

"Just one," he told me, lightly. "With YOU."

I got embarrassed myself then. But finally I laughed and agreed to be his final experiment.

He certainly had lost his nervousness, but I wondered what would have happened had I thrown my arms round his neck and told him I loved him madly, and had done for the past three weeks?

Yes, it was perfectly true. I'd been smitten at last, by one of my own club members!

The date was wonderful, and it isn't surprising, either, when you pause to remember that it was my very first date. Seems hardly believable for a woman of twenty-six that, doesn't it? But it was perfectly true. Good as I was at arranging other people's lives and loves, I couldn't arrange my own.

He wasn't shy at all, and I even found it easy to dance with him.

I spent a wonderful evening, and was sorry when it came to an end. He saw me home, and came in for a nightcap before he left.

"Well?" I asked, with a smile.

"Well, what do you think?" he said.

"I think you're quite a perfect companion. Nothing at all shy about you now. I can hardly believe there ever was."

"Oh, but there was," he assured me.

"There isn't now, anyway."

"No, the thing's worked wonders for me. And—by the way, I have this to tell you . . . that I've met the girl I wish to marry—"

I was a little taken aback. "You have? And . . ."

"I wasn't shy at all. I felt that at any moment I could have asked her to marry me, without a trace of embarrassment. She's a girl I've always felt I could talk to easily. . . ."

I said, "Congratulations. Sure it wasn't one of the girls that you dated?"

"It was," he said with a grin.

"But you told me none of them were what

you had in mind. That you're particular—"

"So I am. And it was yesterday that I said I hadn't dated the right girl yet. But I have since then—I took her out tonight!"

I said: "That's silly you—JERRY! Do you—do you mean—?"

He stood up and came over towards me.

"Yes, I mean you, my dear."

"But, Jerry—that's silly."

"What's silly about it?"

"But you know nothing about me."

"I know all I want to. . ."

"I—oh—"

He said, "Now it's you who are embarrassed. Look—tell me just one thing: is there any chance for me at all?"

I was crimson; it was all so unexpected.

But I allowed him to take me in his arms and kiss me gently. I returned his kiss.

I said, "How long have you felt like this?"

"You grew on me—I started to feel fond of you about the third time I saw you."

I mused: "That's queer. Then—it started with me about the same time. . ."

He looked delightedly at me. "So it did start with you, too?"

I clung to him. I said, "But—when you joined the club you were most insistent that your object was NOT matrimony?"

He hugged me tighter, and as he brushed my hair with his lips, he murmured:

"A man can change his mind, can't he?"

THE END

I LOST MY MEMORY

(Continued from page 4)

"It's no use. I love you, darling—but I won't have things like this. We'll both do something we may regret. Your memory may come back to you, and you may find that you want to be back with your family again—it wouldn't work out. We'd always be afraid of the 'something' we didn't know—if you have a husband and home, let's find it and him. Then, if you still want me, we can arrange something—divorce—but don't let's throw every principle to the wind and carry on as we are doing."

I said: "I know I want you—it doesn't matter what took place before. . ."

"Please, dear."

I bowed my head. "If you want it that way. But how can we find out who I am? We've studied every 'persons missing' notice and learned nothing."

He said: "I didn't tell you before, because I didn't want to lose you—it was wrong of me. But I knew several days ago that you could be traced by the laundry mark on your underthings—'Lmxi53467.'"

He took the scanties I'd been ironing from me. He said: "I'm going out today, forgetting my work, and coming home with your name and address. . ."

I cried: "Raymond—no—," with a sudden surge of panic that we would lose each other. But he was gone. . .

* * * *

I held tightly to his arm as we turned along a quiet Uxbridge road. He said: "They couldn't give me the name, but the address is that of a cottage just along here."

He halted in front of a little place called Nookside.

"This is it," he said.

We went along the path. The place seemed quiet and very deserted.

"Seems you lived here alone," he said.

"But the baby?" I gasped, sharply.

He tried the door, and it opened to his

touch. Inside, the room was small and neat, a back kitchen. We went through into the front room. On the piano was a picture of a woman, with a smiling man in R.A.F. uniform at her side, and he was holding the little girl of my snapshot in his arms.

And suddenly a wave of gladness swept over me.

I turned to Raymond and put my arms about him. I think I must have had tears in my eyes, for he said: "You remember?"

I nodded dumbly.

"Yes?" he said.

I held on to him. I said: "My name is Rose Ann Graham. I'm a typist in town. I must have been coming back from work when the accident happened. And, darling—I'm not married and never have been!"

He stammered: "But the baby?"

"My sister's. Mother and father are dead, and this used to be my sister's home. I lived here with her and her husband and their little girl, Sheila. When the war came along my sister went out with her baby, to join her husband, who had a staff position on Malta. They—they were killed in the air-raids," I finished, sadly. "This ring, and the picture, and cigarette case, is all that came back to me—they were my keepsakes. They came back with the letter which told me she had left me the house. It seems she asked them to send me the ring, case, and photograph of her baby, just before she died. . ."

Raymond took me in his arms. He said: "I'm sorry, in one way, about your sister. But—I'm certainly glad you're not married after all. You must have been very lonely here?"

He kissed me tenderly, and tightened his arms about me.

"You'll never be lonely again, Rose darling," he told me softly. . .

THE END



AS I whispered my marriage vows, I knew they were a hollow mockery! A pitiful travesty of the real thing. . . .

For I didn't love the man standing by my side at the altar!

It wasn't love that made me marry Richard Trent . . . not love, but a horrid feeling of frustration and spite, that willed me to go through with marrying a man whom I felt could never be anything more than a friend to me!

The music from the big organ swelled to a climax—I only dimly understood I was now Mrs. Richard Trent; it didn't seem to matter, somehow.

Even as Dick kissed me, that first kiss of our wedded life, I was thinking of another man—of Tony Marston. . . .

Lean, good-looking Tony, who had a fleeting resemblance to James Mason. Tony, who swept me off my feet, claiming my whole heart . . . then threw me over when he found somebody else.

Yes, I'd been jilted, horribly. Tony didn't bother to let me down gently—he wasn't the sort to consider anybody's feelings, was so forthright and to the point.

"Sorry, Kit . . ." he told me, with that wry, twisted grin of his, "wish you hadn't come round. . . ."

I wished I hadn't, too. Only days of agony and sleepless nights of worry, wondering why Tony was breaking his dates with me, why he wasn't writing to explain—that drove me to forget my pride and go round to his digs, to find out the truth. . . .

And his scraggy, sallow-faced landlady . . . she leered at me, telling me to go upstairs to Tony's room. and she cackled an evil laugh, disappearing into the back premises, from which came the smell of cooking cabbage.

So my reluctant feet took me up the creaking stairs. I saw Tony's room—a card with his name printed on it was tacked to the door. I knocked, timidly . . . his loud, assured voice called out: "Come in. . . ."

I pushed open the door. Tony stood at the window; he wasn't alone. His arms

were around a girl, holding her tightly to him.

A blonde, who looked at me with babyish blue eyes, and laughed, a shrill sort of laugh, so I didn't need to look at the couple of bottles and glasses on the small table to know she'd been drinking too much.

And Tony looked over her shoulder, astonishment on his rugged features.

"Kit . . . gosh . . ." he gasped out. "Thought it was Mrs. Greer, with some drinks I'd ordered to be sent in. . . ."

Just for a moment he seemed embarrassed, then a grin broke through . . . the twisted smile I'd always remember.

"I'm sorry . . . Kit . . ." he said, and all the time the blonde was clinging to him, her body arched against his. "Sorry, Kit. Wish you hadn't come round. . . . I thought—you'd understand . . . the way things were. . . ."

Somehow, I kept my legs from crumpling up. Nobody can ever know the effort it cost me. Maybe I even smiled—a ghost of a smile, it must have been.

"I—I understand, now," I said, hoping he didn't notice the heartbreak in my voice.

I turned, shoulders sagging. The blonde laughed; I could have killed her then.

"Why don't you join the party?" she asked, thickly. "Yes, join the party. . . ."

I heard Tony say: "Shut up." Then a scuffle, as I banged shut the door, and reckoned perhaps he was tearing himself away from the blonde's clinging white arms.

Downstairs I ran, blinded by tears, and heard the door behind me tugged open . . . Tony's voice, pleading:

"Kit—just a minute . . . heck, I can't let you go. . . ."

Sobbing, I glanced round—Tony was out on the landing, but the girl had followed him, catching his arm, trying to pull him back.

I stumbled on, fumbled with the lock of the outside door, and was in the street, glad darkness was coming down, so nobody would see my face, swollen and streaked by tears. . . .

Well, I never saw Tony again. Somebody told me he had left the town, got a job up North. It didn't matter to me where he was . . . now.

There was Dick. Richard Trent, who was all that Tony wasn't. Strong, stolid, . . . reliable.

I'd known Dick for ages—we used to work in the same office, before he got a better job as manager of a rival firm. Dick had always loved me, I suppose. But I hadn't encouraged him, for he hadn't been quite my type.

Hadn't—until Tony let me down! Then Dick seemed a haven, somewhere I could

shelter from all the cruel hurts of life. I began to think it would be rather wonderful to be Dick's wife—even if I did not love him!

It promised security—salve for my wounded pride, to know somebody cared, somebody who would never hurt me, the way Tony had done. . . .

Oh, there was maybe something of spite involved in my decision to marry Dick—I knew word of the wedding would get to Tony through some of his friends in the town, and perhaps he would feel a pang or two of remorse, knowing he had driven me into another man's arms, and now I was out of his reach, forever. . . .

Yes, that was what made me marry Dick Trent . . . and why my marriage vows were a hollow mockery! For I didn't love the man who had become my husband. . . .

* * * *

Poor Dick. He must have realised, on our honeymoon, that there was something lacking . . . my kisses were cold, lacking the warmth a man expects to find in his wife.

But Dick was so patient and kind . . . understanding, too. For he looked across the hotel room at me, as I sat at the dressing table, fluffing my hair.

"Seems as if, Kit . . ." he began, and crossed the floor in a few long strides to stand behind me, "seems as if we just don't understand each other, dear. Oh, don't worry—everything will come all right. Every marriage, I guess, needs a little adjusting, before things are perfect. And, darling, I love you so much . . . always remember that, no matter what happens."

I frowned at his reflection in the mirror. A tumult of thoughts chased themselves through my mind. "How much did Dick know?" I asked myself. Did he realise I had married him only as second-best?

It seemed like it, from the way he spoke!

"You think—everything will come all right?" I looked round at him, something of pleading in my voice, and it surprised myself that I should be talking this way.

His hand on my bare shoulder reassured me.

"Yes; of course." His smile was quietly confident. "It just takes time, Kit . . . time for us to become adjusted to married life, and all it implies. Before long, darling, we'll discover that perfect love and understanding that is the basis of all happiness . . ."

Somehow, I found myself hoping he was right. Perhaps, after all, I would learn to love Dick! Or maybe his love, great as it was, would be enough for us both!

I hoped so, with all my heart. . . .

Oh, and I feel it would have been so, if our honeymoon could have gone on forever. But Dick could only be spared from

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the office for ten days—his firm were carrying through important negotiations, and Dick had to be back in London to make sure everything was going through smoothly.

We'd got a furnished flat out Harrow way; cosy, it was, and I should have felt lucky, only I didn't. Perhaps because I was left alone so much, with Dick working long hours, and it gave me so much time to think and brood over everything.

Dick seemed so worried and pre-occupied these days, and seemingly had no time for anything except his work. I gathered snags had cropped up, and it was a strain on my husband trying to iron things out.

Despite myself, I discovered we were drifting further and further apart. More than ever, my marriage seemed a mockery. There was nothing of the perfect love and understanding Dick had spoken about on our honeymoon. . . .

I began to wonder. Was I fated never to find happiness?

Or was it only my own foolishness in marrying without love that was recoiling on my own head?

Then . . . a Tuesday afternoon. The streets were hot and sun-drenched as I walked down to the shop on the corner, where there were sometimes iced cakes. A perfect summer day. Only the sunshine didn't fit in with my mood of bleak despair.

That morning, Dick hadn't even kissed me before he went off to the office. A small thing—yet it seemed a turning point in our relations. Because it showed Dick didn't care . . . either!

I had talked him into marrying me . . . yes, I had, shamelessly flinging myself at Dick's head after Tony jilted me, knowing Dick was attracted to me and I could sway him into proposing marriage to me . . . and that was what I did, playing my cards carefully, so Dick asked me to marry him

Oh, my mind was in a whirl, walking down the street, and I felt ready to fling myself in front of the traffic swishing past, I was so upset and unhappy.

I saw a red car edge out from behind a bus, drawing into the kerb. The wide door swung open . . . I saw the driver lean out.

"Tony Marston. . . ." my lips said his name, as his feet touched the ground, and he came to meet me, holding out his hands.

Yes, it was Tony. Smart, prosperous-looking, driving a sleek, low-slung car. A Tony who seemed to have grown older, more settled, in the months since I last saw him.

But I remembered the blonde's clinging white arms around his neck . . . and shuddered.

"Kit. . . ." his voice was surprisingly

humble, "I have been looking everywhere for you. Somebody told me you'd married Trent. Kit—you can't . . . love him . . . no, you can't!"

He was gripping my hands so tightly that it hurt, yet I didn't mind the pain of my crushed fingers. I knew I was right where I belonged, beside Tony. . . .

I looked at him, fixedly, battling to conceal my real feelings, for I did not wish Tony to know how shaken I was by this chance encounter.

"I thought—you'd gone away . . ." I ignored the subject of myself being married to Dick Trent. "They told me you'd got a new job in . . . Manchester, was it?"

"Leeds," he corrected me, the old smile quirking his lips. "The firm are opening a branch here, so I was sent to take charge. Seems I've landed on my feet, for the job is okay. The job is. But, Kit, you and I—that's what worries me. . . . I was such a fool; that dame I got entangled with . . . God, was I an idiot, ruining everything—for a cheap little gold-digger. . . ."

"Well, you did." I felt absurdly like a school teacher, correcting an erring pupil. "Where is she, Tony?"

He made his brows knit together. "Oh, heaven knows. Kit, she never meant anything—just I was mad, fell for her shallow charms. . . . forgot everything, except her easy kisses. . . ."

He went on and on, flogging himself like a man suffering mortal torment. His words beat against my ears, yet hardly penetrated, for I was thinking fast . . . and astonishingly clearly.

I could understand how it had been with Tony. The girl was pretty, in a flashy way, and he had been taken in by her outward appeal. No doubt his infatuation would have burnt itself out. . . . I would never have known anything of the incident . . . if I hadn't gone round to his digs, and saw the sordid incident for myself. . . .

Yes, I understood now it had meant nothing. All Tony's love was for me—I saw that now, in the burning light of his eyes, in which his stricken heart was revealed.

And I was frightened at what I read there . . . all the primitive love and hunger lived in his eyes, the way they devoured me. . . .

"Kit—I have been a fool!" his voice broke sharply. "But—do we have to suffer all our lives, just because I made one hideous mistake?"

What he meant burst on me with the impact of an atomic bomb. It shattered my world, understanding how it must be—me married to one man, when all the time I loved somebody else. . . .

If only I hadn't been so rash, marrying Dick Trent! Had I only paused to think—

then I would have realised that a loveless marriage can never mean anything. . . .

"You must divorce Trent. . . ." I heard Tony speak out of another world. "Yes, Kit . . . divorce him, for your marriage isn't happy. . . ."

"How do you know—that?" I shot at him.

"I can see it . . . in your face. . . ." Tony said, speaking slowly, so gravely. "We love each other, dear . . . neither of us can ever belong utterly to anybody else. . . ."

Perhaps he was right! Deep down in my heart I knew it was true what he said.

But divorce? Dick would never agree to that! I knew he wouldn't. . . .

I realised Tony had an arm round my waist, was steering me into the car. He leaned over, slamming the door shut.

"Where are you going?" I demanded, as he switched on the engine.

His sideways glance was supremely confident.

"Somewhere quiet . . . where we can talk things over, Kit."

I settled myself back against the cushions, closing my eyes, for I felt suddenly tired and worn. The warm sun touched my cheeks, and I felt suddenly at peace with the world. . . .

* * *

Tony drove me along the bypass, then cut down a lane, that didn't go anywhere in particular. He drew into the edge of the road, and leaned over to take me in his arms.

I stiffened as he drew me close to him. For I was remembering seeing his arms around another woman. . . .

And I jerked away from him.

"No, Tony." I shook my head. "Please don't. . . ."

I saw he was annoyed, that he wanted to kiss me, and resented my refusal.

"What's the matter?" he spoke rather sharply, making me look at him. "Kit . . . you know how it is with me—I love you. . . ."

"I wonder. . . ." I spoke half to myself, remembering the blonde, how I had come on them in each other's arms.

Tony deceived me then. I realised, suddenly, he was not very reliable, wasn't to be trusted.

"You've got to go away with me." His voice was thick. "Darn Trent . . . he's through, anyway. . . ."

I was hardly listening, until he said that about Dick, and I looked up, sharply.

"Through—what do you mean?" I asked, wrinkling my brows.

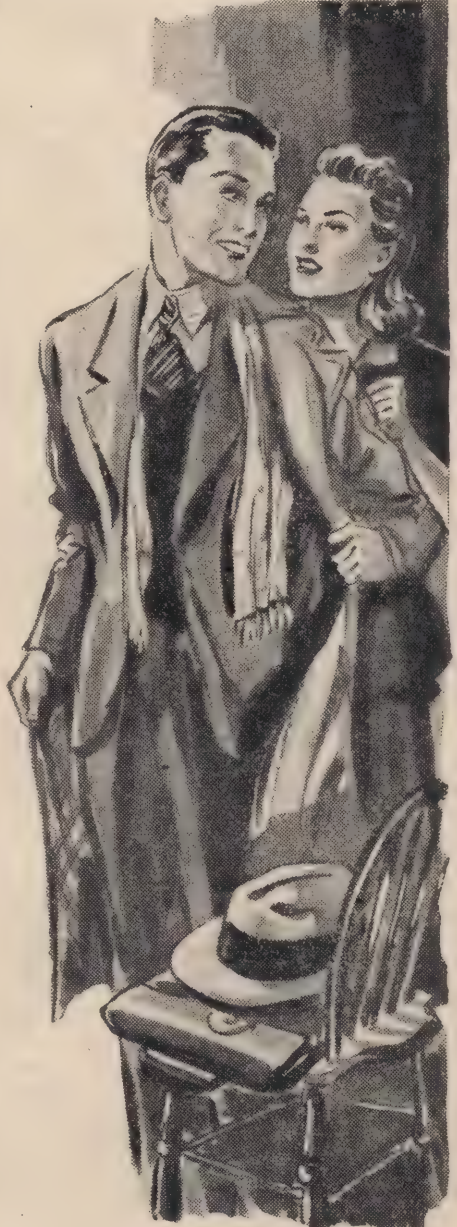
"I mean what I said. He's through, finished with . . . that husband of yours. . . ."

He gave a low chuckle. "Yes, it is the end of Trent. . . ."

I clutched Tony's arm. "What do you mean? Explain yourself . . . what is it, about Dick?"

I saw his broad shoulders give a shrug.

"The company was in a bad way, financially. The last manager, before Trent took over, let things slide, and meant Dick Trent was against things right from the start. He put his savings into t'ie concern, to try and



Dick came in—I ran through helping him off with his coat

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get the business on its feet again . . . It was like flogging a dead horse. I had it, confidentially, that the company have failed. . . ."

Slowly, I shook my head, as if to clear it. I was seeing things, now. No wonder Dick had been so worried, and working practically day and night, ever since our honeymoon!

I thought he was neglecting me . . . but it was only because the business needed his undivided attention, in his desperate attempt to put it through a difficult period.

And he had failed. . . . poor Dick. . . . Not only would he be out of a job, but he would lose the money he had invested in the business. Things looked black for Dick. . . .

Tony rambled on; I was not listening, for a riot of thoughts surged through my head.

I was thinking of Dick, how terribly he would feel it, being a failure. Yet it wasn't his fault—he'd worked like ten men, to try and avert the inevitable. . . .

Poor Dick . . . and now, he was down. . . .

And I had been thinking of leaving him! Yes, of going away with Tony, and asking Dick to divorce me!

It was like hitting a man when he was down. . . .

I found myself repeating something under my breath.

For richer or poorer, in sickness or health. . . . There I was going through it, the jumbled words of my marriage vows—those vows I had taken so lightly at the time!

Then, repeating them had seemed a mockery. . . .

But now I wasn't so sure!

It all meant something, the solemn marriage ceremony. It tied Dick and I together, with a knot that nothing could ever break! We were man and wife—for richer or poorer—man and wife, until death did us part. . . .

Funny that I should be thinking this, I told myself. I hadn't given it much of a thought, before.

"You're not listening, Kit. . . ." Tony's voice was querulous. "I do declare, your mind is miles away. See, I got everything planned for us—there's nothing. . . ."

My hand on his arm stopped him. He must have seen the change in me. I felt, somehow, my eyes were shiny, like stars, as if they reflected the truth in my heart.

The truth that my husband came first . . . that the vows I had taken did mean something. . . .

"Drive me back," I told Tony, and stopped his flow of protests. "Please . . . you are only wasting your breath. You see, I'm getting the correct slant on things—at last. . . ."

I knew I could never explain how things were to Tony; he would not understand . . . he was too selfish and self-centred. But finally I got him to take me back, and I jumped out to the pavement, knowing my infatuation for Tony was dead, and that it could never be revived again. . . .

* * *

Dick was late in getting home that night, but I kept a dainty meal for him ready, heating by the fire. He came in, and I ran through, helping him off with his coat.

A sigh escaped him . . . deep and weary, as if he was almost all out. . . .

"What a day!" He gave me a quick smile, then his arms went around me, and I was aware of his eyes looking into mine. "Kit, I've been a proper bear lately, a bear with a particularly sore head. Why, I believe some mornings I never even kissed you before I left for the office. . . ."

"You didn't," I admitted. "But Dick, why must you work and worry so much? Is it worth it?"

He gave a nod of his head.

"It has been, dear!" A note of triumph was in his voice. "This afternoon proved that! I've had to work like the devil, trying to interest a big combine in the business. . . . Today, their managing director signed papers, buying over the whole affair, lock, stock and barrel! From now on, it is their pigeon! Me . . . well, they've made me manager—with a useful increase of salary—but the head office will have all the worry, and I'll have only routine matters to deal with. . . ."

Dazedly, I looked at him, hardly able to believe it was true. For the business hadn't failed—Dick had managed to sell it to another firm, who would have the capital necessary to develop the concern.

"I—I heard a rumour . . . that it had failed. . . ." I muttered.

"Well, it was touch and go—if Corbin's hadn't bought it. . . ." Dick shook his head, then his tired features relaxed, as he kissed me . . . a long, throbbing kiss that made my heart tumble over. . . .

It was with that kiss that I realised the truth of my love for Dick . . . yes, I loved Dick, a real, lasting love, that is the most wonderful thing in the world.

That was a year ago. Ever since, my husband and I have been perfectly happy . . . and I know now that my marriage vows meant something, after all!

Before long, there will be a baby, to set the seal on our happiness—and there is a prayer on my lips as I write this that the baby will be a boy, like his dad, whom I love with all my heart and soul. . . .

THE END

NO TEARS AT PARTING

(Continued from page 10)

I could recall, clear as yesterday, the large, sparkling diamond upon her finger, the proprietary air, the way she had looked at him. It was not of *her* choosing, I was sure. And he—why had he finally baulked from the marriage? A wild hope surged up within me. Had I been wrong, after all? Had he truly loved me, repented when it was too late? Had I lost ultimate happiness by marrying John?

"Don't look so surprised," Phillipe said. "Come—let's go somewhere where we can sit and talk. So much has happened. Who would have thought that my lovely country would crack—like *that*." He snapped his fingers contemptuously. But his expression was not contemptuous. Never, since I had known him, had his face borne such a look of genuine anger.

For the first time, I felt respect for him. If he were capable of anger over the betrayal of France, why, he was capable of real feeling, of something beyond himself. . . .

"Yes, Phillipe. Let's find somewhere to talk."

He tucked his hand into my arm, and again the blood surged within me in a way John had never made it do.

Oh, John, what am I doing to you . . . !

We found ourselves in a little eating-place, with a small orchestra for dancing. And there I learnt the whole story.

Yvonne's father, even then, had been a secret supporter of the Nazis, and she, too. She had revealed this to Phillipe soon after their engagement. When he found that, by marrying her, he would have to sell, not only his body, but his soul, he revolted. Nathalie had turned on him, called him a fool. So because, weak as he was, he remained a true Frenchman; he joined the Army just before war finally came. The collapse, naturally enough, found him in the ranks of De Gaulle.

"So, ma chérie," he smiled, "you did not love such a worthless fellow, after all, eh?" His hand closed over mine. "What a pity you are married. We could have been so happy—now."

My pride rebelled. He took it so much for granted that I still loved him. . . .

"I love my husband," I said, shortly.

His hand tightened. "Do you?" he whispered. "Do you? Why, chérie—it's not so long since you said you loved *me*. You

meant it then, didn't you? You gave yourself to me—I was the first—" His lips brushed my cheek, I went rigid with the intensity of the passion he stirred in my heart. As if divining my feelings, he drew me up, led me on to the dance floor. His arms held me close. It was as if the past had never been, as if I were still in Paris, free and unsullied by bitterness, uncheaped by the baseness of love betrayed.

"I loved you in Paris," Phillipe's voice said, softly. "I love you now, sweet. Stay with me tonight."

His arms tightened, strained me to him. For a moment longer the spell lasted, then I wrenched myself free—from the false passion which I had dignified by the name of love. I saw him as he really was—handsome, shiftless, ruled by his emotions, utterly without principle, redeemed only by the tiny spark of patriotism which had prevented him from becoming a mountebank, a charlatan of love. Love? Disgust shook me.

"You're vile!" I flung at him. "So vile that you could take me, young and innocent, then throw me away like a dirty rag—for money! So vile, now that you know I'm married, you'll still try to make love to me. What of my husband? He counts for nothing in your estimation, does he? Nobody ever could, while you're around—that's the way you think. But this time you're wrong. I said I loved you in Paris. It wasn't true. All I ever felt for you was a passion I didn't know how to handle. I love my husband—how deeply I never realised until now. Thanks, Phillipe—that's the only good thing you've ever done for me."

Without giving him a chance to reply, I ran out of the place, out of his life. And he out of mine, for ever.

Because, when John came home five days later, I told him everything—even that last final weakness for Phillipe. And because John is the kind of man he is, he understood.

Phillipe is now no more than a name, a figment of the past which has vanished with the war. The Continent is free again, and so is my heart. We are at peace, John and I—truly at peace. He fills the orbit of my days and I his. Together with John Junior.

THE END

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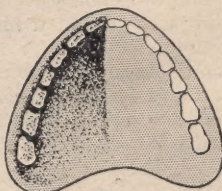
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